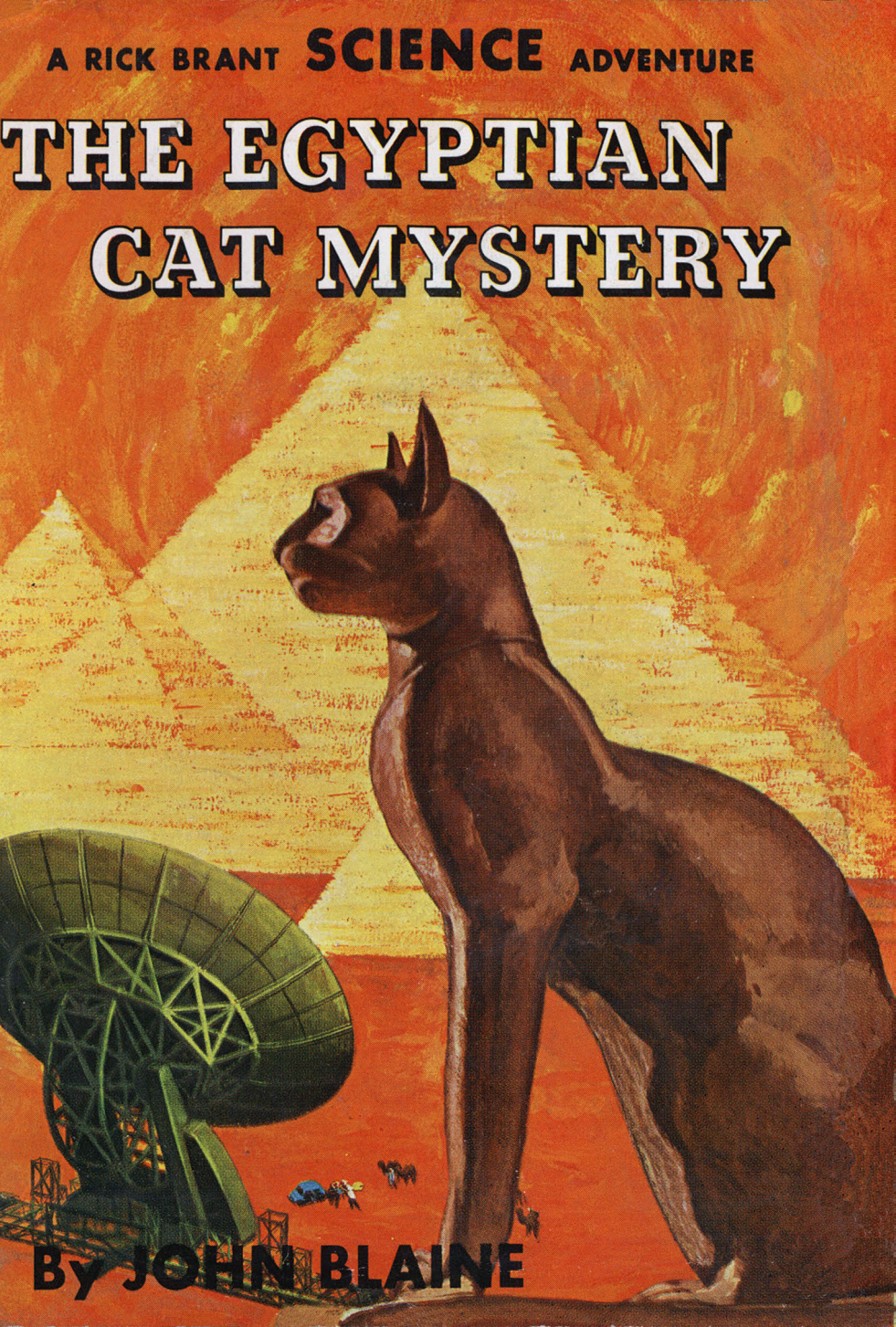
A RICK BRANT **SCIENCE** ADVENTURE

# THE EGYPTIAN CAT MYSTERY



By JOHN BLAINE

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# THE EGYPTIAN CAT MYSTERY

By JOHN BLAINE

In Chicago, a man speaks into the telephone: "The cat is ready!" With these four words a chain of harrowing events is set into motion which involves Rick Brant and his pal Don Scott in ten days of danger, intrigue, and suspense.

Simultaneously, on Spindrift Island off the New Jersey coast, Rick and Scotty accept the well-meant invitation from Dr. Parnell Winston, of the Spindrift Scientific Foundation staff, to join him on an assignment in Egypt to investigate mysterious signals from a radio telescope recently constructed by the Egyptian Astronomical Society.

And when an affable merchant asks Rick and Scotty to deliver a small statue of a stylized Egyptian cat to a bazaar in Cairo, the boys agree, never dreaming that the harmless-looking model will place them directly between two ruthless adversaries, both dead set on one objective — gaining possession of the Egyptian cat.

In the shadows of the ancient pyramids, while fiercely guarding the mysterious cat at great personal risk, and working with Dr. Winston on an outer-space puzzle five thousand light years old, the boys find the surprising answers to both mysteries.

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**THE ELECTRONIC MIND READER**

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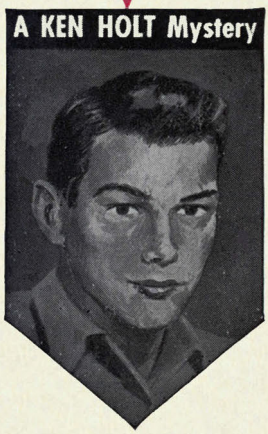


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THE MYSTERY OF THE INVISIBLE ENEMY
THE MYSTERY OF GALLOWS CLIFF

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# THE EGYPTIAN CAT MYSTERY

JOHN BLAINE

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# THE EGYPTIAN CAT MYSTERY

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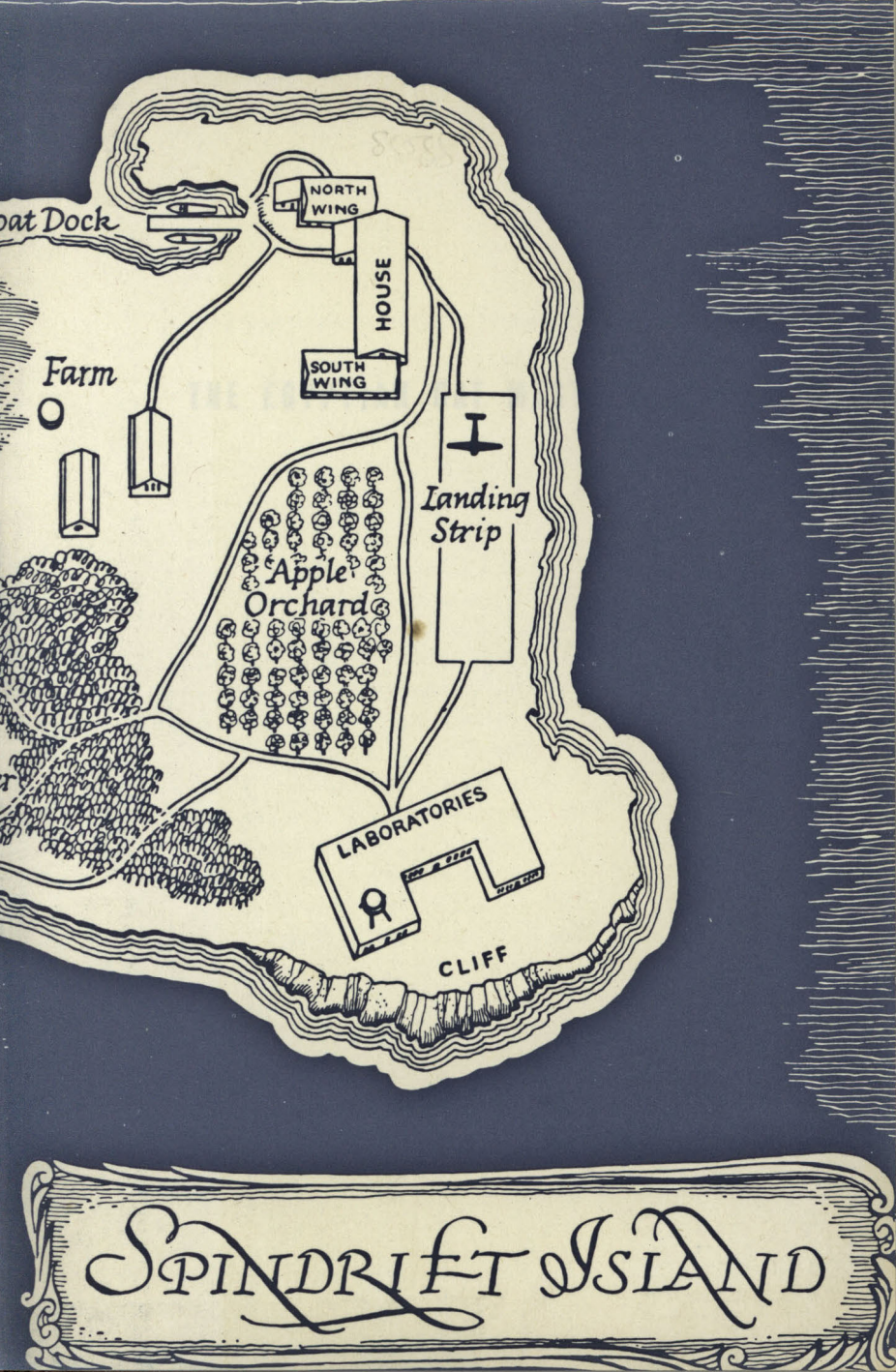
Wooded Land
Pirate's
Rocket L
Tidal Flats
CLIFF
CLEARING
New Jersey Coast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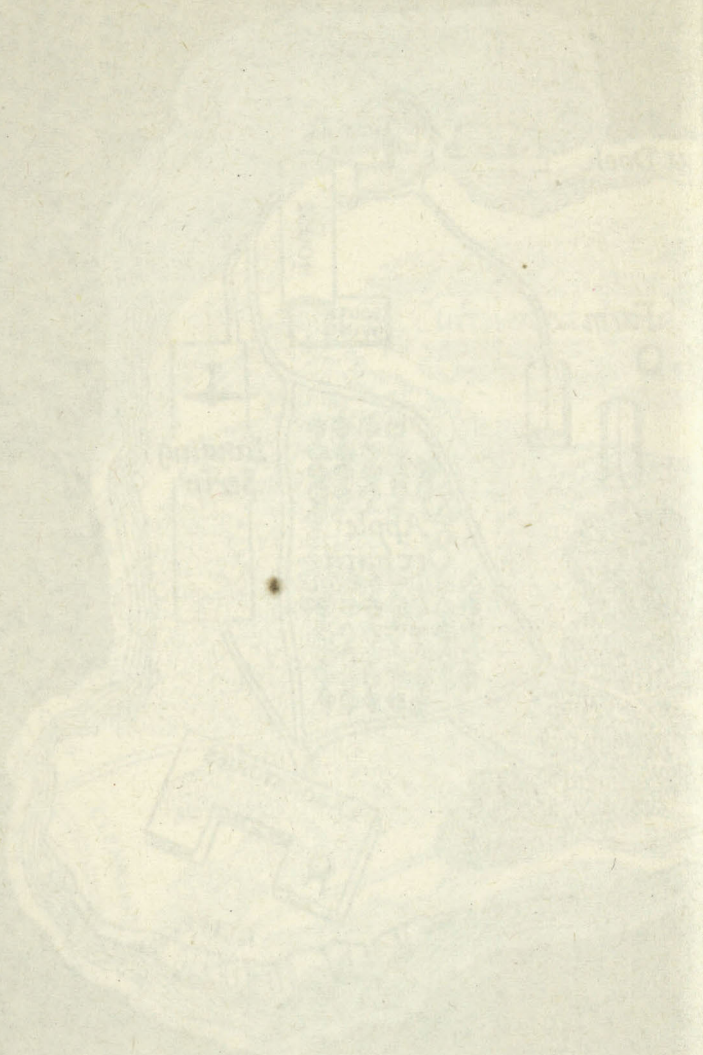
NORTH WING
HOUSE
SOUTH WING
Farm
Landing Strip
Apple Orchard
LABORATORIES
CLIFF
SPINDRIFT ISLAND



# THE EGYPTIAN CAT MYSTERY

*The* RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE *Stories*

BY JOHN BLAINE

THE ROCKET'S SHADOW
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THE WHISPERING BOX MYSTERY
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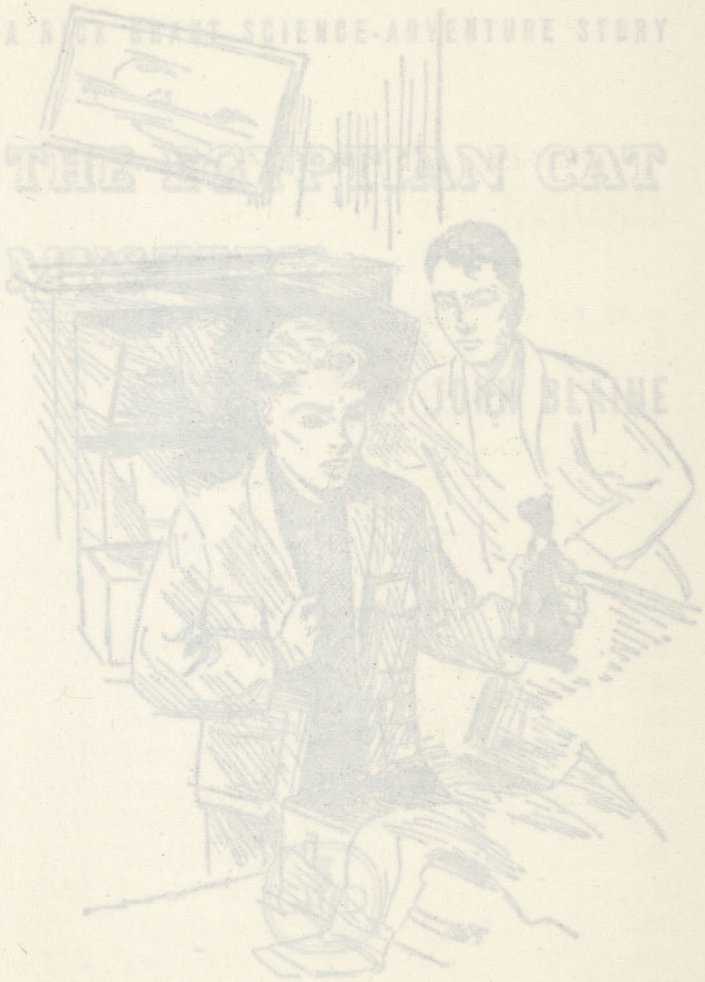

*The room had been searched inch by inch. Someone wanted the cat!*

A RICK BRANT SCIENCE-ADVENTURE STORY

# THE EGYPTIAN CAT MYSTERY

BY JOHN BLAINE

GROSSET & DUNLAP PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK, N. Y.

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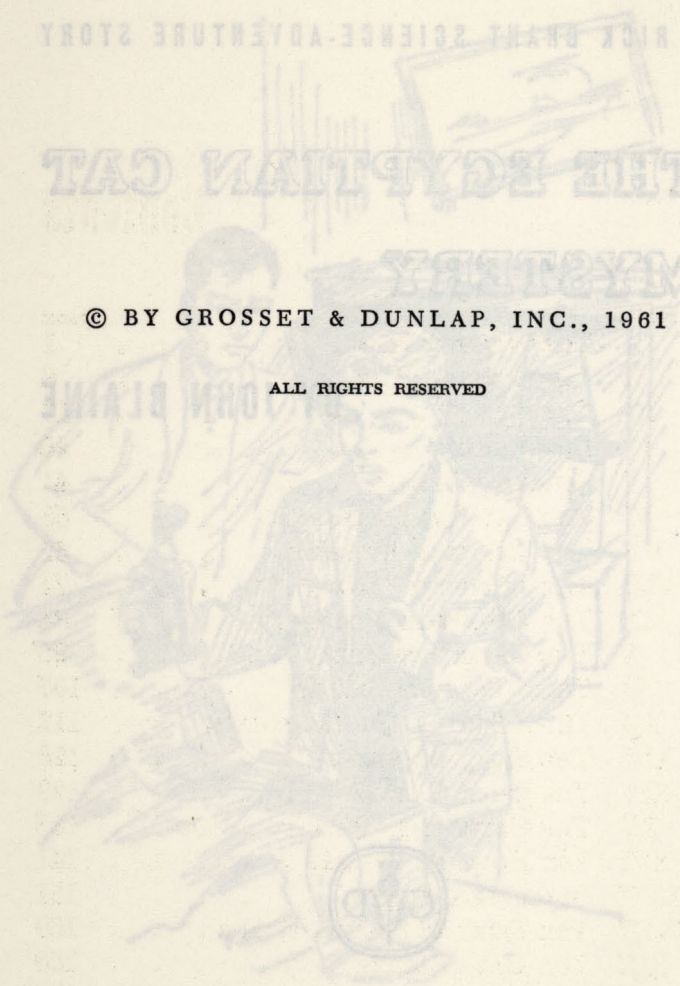

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Printed in the United States of America

# THE EGYPTIAN CAT MYSTERY

THE EGYPTIAN CAT MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

# The Winston Plan

THE date was December twenty-third. The time along the Greenwich meridian, from which all world times are measured, was 8:15 P.M. At widely scattered points around the globe, four voices were raised simultaneously.

Even an experienced observer could not have found a connection between the four voices and what they were saying, yet each voice started actions that would soon be interwoven into a single pattern—a pattern of danger, adventure, and mystery that would culminate in sudden violence within sight of one of the seven wonders of the world.

In Chicago, it was 2:15 in the afternoon. At the edge of the city a man spoke into the telephone in the office of a small plastics factory. "The cat is ready," he said.

In Paris, a phone rang. The man who answered noted in the log that his overseas call had gone through at exactly 9:15 P.M. He picked up the phone and spoke crisply. "*Monsieur l'Inspecteur*? . . . *Bien*. This is Interpol. We have a relay for you from

the United States. Monsieur, this will please you—and it most certainly will amaze you. Message begins . . .

In Cairo, the time was 10:15 P.M. A famous Egyptian astronomer walked into his office and called to his associate. "Hakim! Good news. He can come. Now we can find out what that accursed hydrogen-line impulse means."

On Spindrift Island, off the coast of New Jersey, it was 3:15 in the afternoon. The island was quiet under a blanket of snow. The long, gray laboratory buildings, where so many dramatic scientific developments had taken place, were deserted. Only in the homes of the scientists was there activity, and all of it was in preparation for Christmas.

In the big main house on the seaward side of the island, Dr. Hartson Brant, director of the world-famous Spindrift Scientific Foundation, walked to the foot of the stairs and called to his son.

"Rick, can you come to the library in five minutes? Bring Scotty with you."

Rick Brant, a tall boy with light-brown hair and eyes, paused in his gift wrapping long enough to call an affirmative to his father, then he made sure Don Scott, whose room was next door, had heard the summons.

Scotty had. He came through the connecting door. "What's up?"

"Don't know. Maybe Dad has some Christmas chores for us to do."

Scotty, a big, husky boy with black hair and brown

eyes, was an ex-Marine who had originally joined the Spindrift group as a guard during the adventure of *The Rocket's Shadow*. Since then, he and Rick had become the closest of friends, and the Brants had accepted him as a full-fledged member of the family.

"I'm willing, whatever it is," Scotty told Rick. "I'm so full of Yuletide spirit I may bust a seam from sheer joy."

Rick grinned. He felt exactly the same way. He continued wrapping the present for his sister Barbara, a pretty girl a year his junior. Barby had a definite talent for sketching and painting and Rick had bought her a complete artist's kit, hoping it would encourage her natural skill.

"She'll be tickled pink," Scotty remarked. "Come on. Let's go down."

"Go ahead. I'll be right with you." Rick finished taping on a spray of evergreen, then he carefully put the present out of sight under his workbench. Barby's lively curiosity was subdued at Christmas time, but it was better not to take chances. He surveyed the bench to see if he had left anything out. Usually it was cluttered with apparatus, tools, and parts, because Rick was an inveterate experimenter, but it was clear now, in preparation for the holiday.

He walked down the corridor to the stairs, smiling to himself. Christmas at Spindrift was fun. The entire scientific staff and their families joined in, first in cutting their own trees from the stand of spruce at the back side of the island, then in decorating the big

tree in the Brant library. On Christmas Eve there was a Yule log to be brought in and presents to be exchanged, although the Brants waited until morning to open their gifts to each other.

Hartson Brant and Scotty were waiting in the library, standing before the great fireplace in which logs crackled merrily. Seated in the leather chair next to the Christmas tree was Parnell Winston, one of the leading staff scientists.

Winston was a big man, with jet-black curly hair and great bushy eyebrows that hid merry blue eyes. He was an expert in cybernetics, the science of electronic computer design, and his contributions to the theory of computer operations, and to advanced electronic control systems, were known to scientists around the world. Winston had originally joined the staff to supervise the design and construction of a "thinking machine," the Tractosaur.

Hartson Brant, an older version of his son, greeted the boy. "Come in, Rick. Parnell, the floor is yours."

Winston motioned the boys to chairs. "Sit down. I called this meeting to make a proposal. But first, how are your bank balances? Fat or thin?"

Rick considered. Most of his income, including his small salary as a laboratory assistant, went into his education fund. However, the salary he had earned for working at the Nevada rocket base during *The Scarlet Lake Mystery* had been put into his "ready" fund. "I'm in good shape," he said, and Scotty echoed him.

"Fine. Now, the Egyptian Astronomical Society

has just finished constructing a new radio telescope. It's a first-rate instrument from which we expect great things. Your father and I were in at its birth, so to speak. We consulted on the initial designs during a meeting of the International Astronomical Union."

Rick knew that was one of the many world-wide private scientific organizations operating under the International Council of Scientific Unions. He also knew of the growing importance of radio astronomy, but he hadn't known the Egyptians were in on it.

"Apparently some unusual trouble developed during the tuning of the instrument," Winston went on. "Earlier this afternoon I had a phone call from Cairo, and a request to help our Egyptian colleagues iron out the bugs. I accepted."

Rick sat upright in his chair. Winston going to Cairo? How did this concern Scotty and him?

"My proposal is this," Winston concluded. "The Egyptians are short of technicians and we may need help. I'll leave the day after Christmas, returning within ten days. If you two can pay half your expenses, and help me half the time, I'll take you with me."

Both boys jumped to their feet. Rick looked anxiously at his father.

Hartson Brant smiled. "According to Parnell's schedule, you'll be back just in time for school at the end of the holidays. *If* you want to go, of course."

Rick let out a wild yell of exuberance that brought his sister Barby running to the library. She looked at

the group with wide eyes. "Rick! Was that you?"

He grinned at her. "It wasn't a wounded buffalo, Sis. Guess what? We're going to Egypt!"

Barby's pert face lengthened. "I don't suppose I can go, too?"

Parnell Winston walked over and ruffled her blond hair. "Not this time, Barby. But I'll make you a promise. The next field expedition under my supervision will include my wife, you, and Jan Miller."

The prospect of an expedition that included Jan, daughter of one of the staff physicists and her dearest friend, cheered Barby at once.

"I don't suppose you could promise to leave Rick and Scotty at home?" she asked.

"Can't promise." Winston chuckled. "We might need them to carry your luggage. Girls can't travel without a dozen suitcases each, I'm told."

The scientist turned to the boys. "Start reading up on the country, and I'll arrange for you to get some additional background by meeting some Egyptians. It happens that an Egyptian physicist is arriving in New York today for a lecture tour of American universities. There's a reception for him tomorrow. We'll drive to New York. You can meet him and some of his countrymen, and we'll go to the consulate to obtain visas. Are your passports and health cards up to date?"

Fortunately, all was in order because the boys had spent a part of the summer in the Sulu Sea region, where they had helped to locate and rescue two staff scientists.

Barby asked wistfully, "Couldn't I meet some real Egyptians, too?"

As Scotty had once said, if Barby ever got wistful while fishing, the fish would knock themselves out trying to climb into the boat to cheer her up. Winston replied quickly, "No reason why not. I'll check with my host, but I'm sure it's all right, so you can plan to come with us."

Rick's eyes met Scotty's. He shrugged. He was glad in one way that his sister could go, because he always hated to have her unhappy about being left behind. On the other hand, Barby was unpredictable. He couldn't be sure of what she might do or say, but he could be certain her curiosity and enthusiasm would stir up something.

If Rick had been enough of a prophet to see all the events his pretty sister's helpfulness at the reception would get him into, he would have handcuffed her to the Christmas tree before ever allowing her off Spindrift Island.

CHAPTER II

# The Egyptian Cat

THE reception for Dr. Hayret Ahmed was at the home of an Egyptian importer named Mohammed Bartouki. Barby, the boys, and Winston rang the bell of a brownstone house on New York's Upper East Side promptly at noon.

Winston had checked with his host by phone, and his request that he be allowed to bring his young associates to meet Bartouki had been met with enthusiastic pleasure. Mohammed Bartouki had assured the scientist that he would look forward to meeting the young people of Dr. Hartson Brant's household.

The door was opened by a figure right out of *The Arabian Nights,* or so it seemed to the young people. The doorman was a huge Negro dressed in flowing red trousers that tucked in at the ankles. His sandals turned up in points at the front, Persian style. An embroidered vest set off a loose white silk shirt, and on his head was a red fez, shaped like a section of a cone, slightly less in diameter at the top than at the bottom.

"Please come in," he requested. His voice was ac-

cented. Rick saw that he had two horizontal hairline scars on each cheek.

The man took their coats, giving Barby a courtly bow. "Dr. Bartouki asks if you will please join him in the salon. It is straight ahead."

As they walked down the carpeted hall Barby gave Winston a smile of sheer delight. "He's right out of a movie," she whispered. "Even to the fez and the scars on his cheeks."

Winston smiled back. "In Egypt a fez is called a *tarboosh.* The scars mean he is a Sudanese, from the country south of Egypt. I agree he's a very picturesque type. I suspect Bartouki dressed him up for effect. It's a common practice."

"What's Bartouki a doctor of?" Rick asked.

"I don't know. Law or something similar, I imagine. He's not a scientist or medical doctor."

Mohammed Bartouki himself came to meet them. He was a round little man, scarcely taller than Barby, with twinkling eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses. He was dressed in an ordinary business suit.

"My dear Dr. Winston, how nice of you to come. And these are your young friends?"

Winston introduced the young people. Rick found his hand captured in a warm, firm grip.

"Welcome, welcome," Bartouki said, beaming. "We will have an opportunity to talk about your trip to my country as soon as these scientists turn the conversation to some matter of science we do not understand." He smiled at Winston. "You see, I know you professional people. The nationality does not matter.

Put two of you together and the conversation at once turns to some development a poor merchant cannot possibly comprehend. That is why I am glad you brought Miss Barbara, and Rick and Scotty, as you called them, if I may be so familiar. At least I can talk with them."

Rick could see that Barby was charmed by the little merchant, and he could understand why. Bartouki radiated warmth and enthusiasm.

In a moment the four Spindrifters were being introduced to Dr. Hayret Ahmed and a bewildering assortment of people. Evidently they were all scientists of different nationalities, except for two officers of the United Arab Republic consulate. Rick recognized a few of the names, and found he knew one or two of the Americans.

True to Bartouki's prediction, the talk turned to scientific subjects within minutes. Rick followed the conversation, which was about a new development in the capture and study of free radicals, but only for a few minutes. The scientists were over his head in short order.

Scotty chuckled. "I always thought a free radical was a political bomb thrower out of jail."

"It's a highly energetic chemical particle," Rick said.

"That's nice," Barby said. "Only I'd rather talk with Dr. Bartouki than discuss energetic chemicals."

The merchant arranged things very smoothly. He announced that he would not dream of allowing protocol to interfere with such a fascinating conversa-

tion, and put the scientists together at one end of the table. The officers from the consulate, evidently in deference to the distinguished Egyptian scientist, continued to listen closely to the talk, even though Rick was sure they didn't understand a word.

The three young people found themselves free to talk with their host, and the boys at once began firing questions.

Bartouki described Cairo and promised that he would present them with guidebooks to be read on the way over. He told them about things to do in the ancient city, and listed places that were "musts" for tourists. They included the step pyramid at Sakkarah, the Egyptian Museum, the mosque of Sultan Hassan, and the mosque and college of El Azhar, founded in the ninth century.

"Of course you will see a great deal of the Sphinx and the pyramids at Giza, since our new radio telescope is nearby. But most of all, you must see El Mouski."

"What is that?" Rick asked.

"It is the Cairo bazaar. There are several sections, known as *sooks*. They have names like Khan El Khalili, Ghooriyeh, Sagha, Sook El Nahassin, and so on, but the principal one is Mouski."

"Spell it for me," Barby pleaded.

Bartouki smiled. "What you ask is difficult. We use a different alphabet, so there is no exact equivalent, only what is called transliteration, which uses phonetics. So the bazaar can be Mouski, Muski, Mosky, Mouskey, or anything else that sounds the same.

Even for Giza, where the pyramids are, there are many spellings."

"I wish you'd tell my English teacher that." Barby sighed. "I think my way of spelling is just as good as hers."

Bartouki and the boys laughed sympathetically. The little merchant said, "Whatever the spelling, El Mouski will fascinate you. Many things are made there especially for tourists. Some of the workmanship is excellent, and the prices are very low."

"We haven't had much luck with bazaars that cater to tourists," Scotty replied. "We prefer markets where local people buy, because the things are more authentic."

Bartouki chuckled. "That is wise, in most countries. But consider. The attraction for tourists are things that are clearly Egyptian in origin, no? Such things vanished from all but our museums some years ago. You could not buy a genuine Egyptian tapestry, or a stone carving from a tomb. Such things are beyond price. They are national treasures. But you can buy very attractive and authentic reproductions."

"The people of Cairo wouldn't want reproductions, would they?" Barby asked. "So they have to be made just for tourists."

"And for export," Bartouki added. "I import them myself for a few American shops. After lunch I will show you samples and you will see."

It seemed reasonable to Rick when he thought about it. Genuine Egyptian things simply were not

obtainable. "What else is made for tourists?" he queried.

"Many things, of gold, silver, and ivory. There are bags of camel leather that Miss Barbara would enjoy having. There are brass goods of all kinds, and copperware with a partial tin coating called washed tin."

The conversation paused long enough for a few bites of lunch, then Bartouki resumed. "We try to take good care of tourists in the United Arab Republic, both in Egypt and in Syria. For example, we license our guide-interpreters, who are called *dragomen.* There is also a special police force with no job but aid to tourists. And we are always looking for ways to improve our reproductions to make them more attractive and authentic. I will show you a new design."

By the time luncheon had ended, the talk among the scientists had progressed to the basic theory of what physicists call "the solid state." Even Rick, with his rapidly growing background of scientific knowledge, could understand only fragments of conversation.

"Let them talk over their coffee," Bartouki said. "They are enjoying it. We will retire to my den and I will show you examples from El Mouski."

The samples were everything Bartouki had promised. There were wall hangings, beautifully made of tiny pieces of colored cloth appliqued on a natural-color fabric, bags and pouches of leather, leather hassocks, ivory carvings of ancient Egyptian gods,

inlaid boxes and chests, and dozens of both useful and ornamental utensils of brass, copper, washed tin, and ceramics. Barby went into raptures. At every new item she urged Rick to bring her one just like it.

"I'll rent a jet just to carry my luggage," he said, grinning. "You've already ordered a ton, and I get only sixty-six pounds."

Bartouki came to his rescue. "Let me show you a new tourist attraction. It just arrived by messenger this morning."

He went to a cabinet, opened it, and produced a stone cat. It was about ten inches high, in a sitting position with its tail curled around to meet its feet. It was of sandy texture, reddish in color.

"Sandstone?" Rick guessed.

Bartouki smiled. "I hoped you would say that. Here. Examine it."

Rick took the cat. He liked it very much. The design was clean and elegant, stylized after the Egyptian manner. But it wasn't sandstone. It was heavy, but not heavy enough to be sandstone, and the sheen was not that of a mineral. Whatever the material, it had been fashioned in one piece, probably cast in a mold.

"I give up," he said. "What is it?"

"Plastic," Bartouki replied, obviously pleased. "It did not come from Egypt. It was made right here in America. In Chicago, to be exact. It is what you call a prototype."

"But it's Egyptian in design," Barby protested. She took the cat from Rick and examined it.

"Yes, it is clearly an Egyptian cat. The design came from Egypt, but the cat from America. I have been working on this for months with a plastics company. Now I have the model, and the method. We will reproduce these in quantity in Cairo."

"It's pretty heavy for plastic," Rick commented.

"True. We put a piece of lead in the middle of the casting. You see, it looks like stone, and the buyer will expect it to be heavy. So, for psychological reasons, we give it weight—only not so much that it becomes a problem to carry."

"You certainly have it worked out," Scotty said admiringly. "But why a cat? Why not a . . . a camel?"

"We have camels of camel leather, brass, and wood. But we do not have a good cat. You see, the cat is important in Egyptian history. There was even a cat goddess of the Upper Nile Kingdom, called Bubaste. In the ancient tombs there are sometimes mummies of cats. Some cat lovers think our land first developed the domestic strain of cat. So we believe tourist cat lovers should have an authentic reproduction of one. This particular cat is a faithful copy of an antique, which I am fortunate to own."

"What will you do with it now?" Barby asked.

"Send it to my associate in Cairo, as soon as possible. I would like to airmail it right away, but you Americans overload the mails at Christmas, so it would be safer to wait. Next week I hope to send it with full instructions, hoping to get production started in time for the big tourist season. I wish it could go sooner. It is needed."

Barby said impulsively, "Rick leaves the day after tomorrow. He could take it for you. Couldn't you, Rick?"

There was no reason to refuse. It was certainly a worthy project, and Bartouki had been generous in answering their questions.

"Be glad to," Rick said.

The merchant's eyes lighted. "It would not be an imposition?"

"Of course not. I can put it right in with my clothes. I have plenty of room."

"Believe me, I will be in your debt. And so will my associate, Ali Moustafa. You will like him. He is a great, jolly man, three times my size. If he had a beard, he would resemble your Santa Claus. And he will insist that you accept some token of his appreciation. I will send the instructions separately, so you need not bother with the technical reports."

"I couldn't accept a gift for such a little thing," Rick protested. He looked at the cat, now in Scotty's hands. It was a handsome little statue.

"Ali Moustafa is a hard man to refuse," Bartouki said. "You should not deprive him of the pleasure of making a gift. But I will not press you. It will be between you and him. You are quite sure it will be no trouble?"

Rick's words would return to haunt him during the days ahead. He said blithely, "No trouble at all."

CHAPTER III

# Cairo

THE jet descended smoothly over the desert on the approach to Cairo International Airport. Rick leaned toward the window to watch for the first sign of a runway. In the distance he could see the valley of the Nile River, a great green swath which cut through the tan desert wastes.

"Excited?" Scotty asked.

Rick had to grin. "Excited? Why should I be excited? A trip to Egypt is an everyday event for me. Stop asking silly questions and look at the scenery."

"I would," Scotty told him, "only somebody's head is in the way. I won't exactly say it's a fathead, but it's too thick to see through."

"Real subtle. I like the way you give delicate hints." Rick moved back so Scotty could see, and watched as the great plane dropped toward the desert, then touched down and sped along modern runways to the administration building.

Two Egyptians were waiting as Winston and the boys walked down the stairway, and the scientist at once hurried to greet them. Obviously the three were old friends.

Winston introduced the two boys. The older of the two Egyptians was Dr. Abdel Kerama. He was a tall, gray-haired man of distinguished appearance. Rick thought that in traditional desert costume he would look like the head sheik of all the desert tribes. The younger Egyptian was Dr. Hakim Farid, a youthful, clean-cut man with an attractive smile.

Rick knew from Winston's advance briefing that these were the two leading radio astronomers of the United Arab Republic, and that both had international reputations in the field.

The Egyptian scientists made the boys feel at home right away. Dr. Kerama took Scotty and Winston by the arms, and Dr. Farid fell in step with Rick as the group walked toward the administration building.

"We're glad you could come," Farid said in excellent English. "We'll try to make your visit interesting."

Rick thanked him. "I don't know whether we'll be of much use, but we're willing to do anything we're told. All we ask is a little chance to see your country."

"You'll have every chance," Dr. Farid told him. "Before there is any work for you, Parnell will have to do a pretty thorough analysis of data we've collected. It's a problem that has us . . . what's the American expression? Buffaloed?"

"That's it," Rick agreed. "What kind of problem is it?"

"It's what you might call very strange behavior on the part of a hydrogen-line impulse we picked up

while calibrating our receiver. Are you familiar with radio astronomy?"

"Not very," Rick admitted. "I tried to read some of the current literature when I found we were coming, but most of it is over my head."

"Then I won't bore you with a technical discussion. Briefly, the noise emitted by hydrogen gas in space is very important to us in our analysis of the nature and distribution of matter. This radio noise is, of course, random. Usually when we are examining a hydrogen source we get pretty continuous and regular signals. If we could hear it, there would be a sort of hissing noise. Do you follow me?"

"So far."

"Good. Our problem is that we are picking up impulses. You might even call them signals. They are on the frequency of neutral hydrogen, but it's hard to believe they're natural in origin. We've about concluded that somehow our amplifier system is modulating the incoming hydrogen signal from the antenna. The trouble is, we can't locate the cause."

"Is that why you called Dr. Winston?" Rick asked.

"Yes. He has a reputation for finding bugs in electronic circuits. If he can find this one, we'll be tempted to reward him with a pyramid or something appropriate."

Rick saw the twinkle in Dr. Farid's eyes. "Better not make it a pyramid," he said hastily. "His luggage is limited to sixty-six pounds. They might not let him on the plane with it."

"A happy thought," Dr. Farid said seriously. "You

have saved us from possible embarrassment. It would be useless to give him a pyramid when his weight limit is thirty kilos, as we call sixty-six pounds."

Rick chuckled. One reason he so enjoyed his association with scientists was the dry sense of humor most of them seemed to share.

They reached the administration building and started through the formalities of customs and immigration. The Americans had filled out customs forms and currency declarations on the plane, and in only a short time the formalities were over and their admission into the United Arab Republic was official. The customs inspectors hadn't even asked them to open their luggage.

The trip from the airport took over an hour. It led through Heliopolis, City of the Sun, the first capital of a united Egypt. The land had been governed for over a thousand years from Heliopolis. But that, as Dr. Kerama explained, was over four thousand years ago.

Rick was awed. Coming from a new land where a hundred years seemed a very long time, the antiquity of Egypt stirred his imagination. But there was little that seemed ancient in modern Heliopolis. There were attractive, modern apartment houses, new public buildings, and rows of trees carefully trimmed into perfect green cylinders.

The entry into Cairo itself was through rows of tall wooden or brick structures, along streets traveled by everything from the latest European cars to plodding donkey carts. The people were dressed in a variety of

costumes, from suits and dresses that would have been suitable in New York, to traditional Arab dress with flowing robes and the cloth headdress that is held in place by a band or roll of fabric around the head, just above the eyes.

The car passed the railroad station and the great statue of Rameses the Second, Pharaoh of Egypt. The Nile came into view, and Farid pointed out the row of hotels on the other side. The Shepheard's and the Nile Hilton flanked the older, Victorian bulk of the Semiramis, where they would stay. They sped across a bridge, entered a plaza full of honking horns and speeding cars, then moved to the comparative quiet of a street along the Nile embankment to the hotel.

Uniformed attendants came running for their bags. The group entered the lobby, and Rick looked around with interest.

The Semiramis was big, with lofty ceilings and chandeliers. The walls were decorated with scrolls and tapestries. The rugs had once been red. There was a kind of eighteenth-century grandeur about it, even though it had turned a little shabby over the years.

The formalities of registration were completed, then the Americans went to the cashier and exchanged dollars for Egyptian pounds and coins in units called piastres. They carefully put away their receipts for the exchange, since currency control in the country was strict.

"Go ahead," Winston told the boys. "Farid and

Kerama will come with me. I want to start talking over this interesting problem of theirs, and I imagine you want to rest."

Rick did not feel in the least like resting, but made no comment. He and Scotty got into a tiny, ornate elevator cage with walls of gilded-iron lattice. There wasn't room for the porters with their bags; they ran up the stairs while the boys rode with the smiling elevator operator. It wasn't a fast ride.

"Climbing rate, one hundred feet per minute," Scotty said. Rick grinned.

They were let off at the third floor, and weren't in the least surprised to find the porters waiting for them. They followed the men into a room that made them stop short with amazement.

The entrance to the hotel and the lobby had been big, but the room was enormous, spacious, and very tastefully furnished, European style.

"As big as Grand Central Station!" Scotty exclaimed.

Rick echoed, "We'll rattle around in here like a pair of pebbles in a fifty-gallon tank."

The bath was larger than most American hotel rooms, with a twenty-foot ceiling, and the closet would easily have accommodated a king's wardrobe. Rick thought that maybe it had, in times past.

He tipped the porters and closed the door behind them, then motioned to Scotty. "Go on down to the other end of the room and shout. I want to see if I can hear you."

Scotty started to oblige, grinning, then turned and

called, "Come look at this view!" He had discovered that the French doors at the front of the room opened onto a tiny balcony that overlooked the Nile.

The great river was only the width of a narrow street away. Sailing gracefully along with brown sail set was a Nile boat. The bridge they had crossed was directly ahead of the boat, and Rick looked for the drawspan through which it would pass. There was none!

"He'll crash right into the bridge!" Rick exclaimed. "Why doesn't he correct his course?"

"Rudder stuck, maybe," Scotty offered. "But why doesn't he drop the sail and try to lose headway?"

They watched helplessly as the boat, fully fifty feet in length, bore down on the bridge. There were many people in sight, and a steady line of cars crossing the bridge, but no one paid the slightest attention.

Scotty grabbed Rick's arm. He started to laugh. "Look at that mast!"

Fascinated, Rick watched as the huge mast dipped slowly backward, triangular sail and all, until it lay nearly flat on the deck. The boat slipped under the bridge with room to spare. On the other side, the mast slowly went up to its normal rakish position again, the sail filled, and wind and current bore the boat steadily down the Nile.

"Not exactly the way we'd do it," Rick said with a grin, "but pretty effective." It was a reminder that they were in a new land, where customs were strange to them.

"You learn something new every day," Scotty agreed. "Let's unpack, then go visit the city."

"Better wait and see what Winston has in mind for us," Rick cautioned. He began to stow his clothing in one of the big dressers. He lifted a shirt, and stared down at the Egyptian cat nestling among his T shirts. "Tell you what, if Winston doesn't need us, let's deliver the cat. We can see some of the city coming and going."

When their clothes were stored, they washed away the grime of travel and Rick called Winston's room.

Hakim Farid answered. "Don't think we've forgotten you," the young radio astronomer said. "But Parnell and Kerama wasted no time in getting down to business. I doubt that you could interrupt long enough to get a sensible answer. Do you have any plans?"

"We have an errand at El Mouski," Rick replied. "Would it be all right for us to go?"

"No reason why not. You'll need a car. I would offer you mine, except that you have no local license. You could take a taxi, but a licensed dragoman would be better. Suppose I suggest one with a car?"

Rick remembered that Bartouki had told them a dragoman was a guide-interpreter. "That would be very good of you," he replied.

"All right. I will send one I know, or a friend of his if he is not available. Wait in your room and he will come for you."

Rick thanked Farid and hung up. He reported the conversation to Scotty.

"First time I've ever had a guide in a city," Scotty said. "Makes me feel important, like visiting royalty or something. Couldn't we just get a map instead?"

"We'd still need a car. Might as well get one with a built-in talking map. Besides, I like the idea. I want to be escorted like a visiting prime minister."

There was a paper laundry bag in the closet. Rick used it to wrap the cat against possible scratches. Scotty took the few moments to get some cards written, to which he signed both their names.

There was a polite knock on the door, and Rick opened it. He gaped at the sight of what was apparently their dragoman. He was a magnificent figure in blue pantaloons and short red jacket. He had an engaging black face marred by three straight hairline scars that ran in a diagonal across his cheeks.

"Have honor to present me," the figure announced formally. "Name of Hassan. To serve you."

"Come in, Hassan," Rick invited. "Are you the dragoman Dr. Farid sent?"

"Is same, *ya sidi.* To serve you."

Rick introduced himself and Scotty. He inspected the guide with interest. Hassan was young, with a friendly white-toothed smile. The scars identified him as Sudanese, but Rick didn't know enough about the markings to tell what part of the Sudan he came from. A different part from Bartouki's servant, though, because the scars were at a different angle, and Hassan had three on each cheek.

Rick's quick imagination could picture the Sudanese in a different setting, with scimitar in hand,

guarding the palace of a legendary sultan. It was hard to imagine him in the prosaic role of a guide. Rick resolved to take a picture for Barby's benefit. A blackamoor warrior right out of the tales of Scheherazade! That was how she would see it.

The boys shook hands with the dragoman, and Rick saw that he responded to their obvious friendliness. The costume was an odd one, though. Rick hadn't seen any like it on the street, and he wondered if Hassan wore it for effect, since most of his customers probably were tourists. Later he found that the guess was right.

"Where you like to go?" Hassan asked.

Scotty spoke up. "You know El Mouski?"

Hassan's face split in a wide grin. "Who does not?"

"That'll teach me to ask silly questions," Scotty said ruefully. "Like asking a New Yorker if he ever heard of Central Park."

The boys walked downstairs with Hassan, since it was faster than taking the elevator, and went to the alley behind the hotel where he had parked his car.

The car was a small foreign sedan of a make neither boy had ever heard of. Apparently Hassan also used it as a taxi, because the front passenger seat was taken up mostly by a taxi meter.

Rick showed Hassan the address in his notebook. The guide shook his head. "Please, you read."

Rick looked at him with astonishment. A guide who couldn't read? But apparently it was so. "It is the store of Ali Moustafa," he explained.

Hassan shrugged. "I do not know it. But it can be found. *Enshallah.*"

Although the boys did not recognize it then, the word was a common expression meaning "If God wills it."

They would learn it, though, and with it other Arabic words, including *zanb, dassissa,* and *khatar* —or, in English, crime, intrigue, and danger!

CHAPTER IV

# El Mouski

HASSAN drove out of the hotel alley into a chaos of horns, pedestrians who flirted with sudden death, wildly maneuvering cars, and donkey carts that always seemed on the verge of being hit by an accelerating truck. It was a normal day in Cairo traffic.

The boys watched with mixed fear and amazement—fear that Hassan would hit someone and amazement that he didn't. Time after time he bore down on a slow-moving Egyptian and Rick's heart leaped into his throat until collision was averted by some miracle or other, usually a wild, record-breaking leap by the pedestrian.

The trip from the airport had been along streets that formed a kind of throughway, but in the city itself, the traffic was the kind that would send an American traffic cop screaming for the riot squad. Here, no one seemed to think anything of it.

The boys relaxed a little as it became clear that Hassan knew what he was doing. His driving was perhaps a shade more careful than that of most driv-

ers. Once, as he sped down a crowded, narrow street at forty miles an hour, horns blasted behind them.

Rick turned, but could see nothing wrong. He asked, "Why all the honking, Hassan?"

"They want we go faster," the dragoman said.

Scotty laughed. "Might as well relax. This is the slow, sleepy pace of the Middle East we used to read about."

Rick laughed with him. He had seen hectic traffic before, but nothing to compare with Cairo. This wasn't traffic. It was some kind of wild contest with no rules and only survival as the winner's prize. "Any number can play," he muttered.

He tried to pay attention to signs, but they were in Arabic script. He saw that modern Cairo was giving way to the older city. The buildings were smaller, more closely spaced. Most were of wood, but a few were obviously of ancient stone. In this part of the city, merchants displayed their wares on the sidewalks in front of cubicle-sized stores.

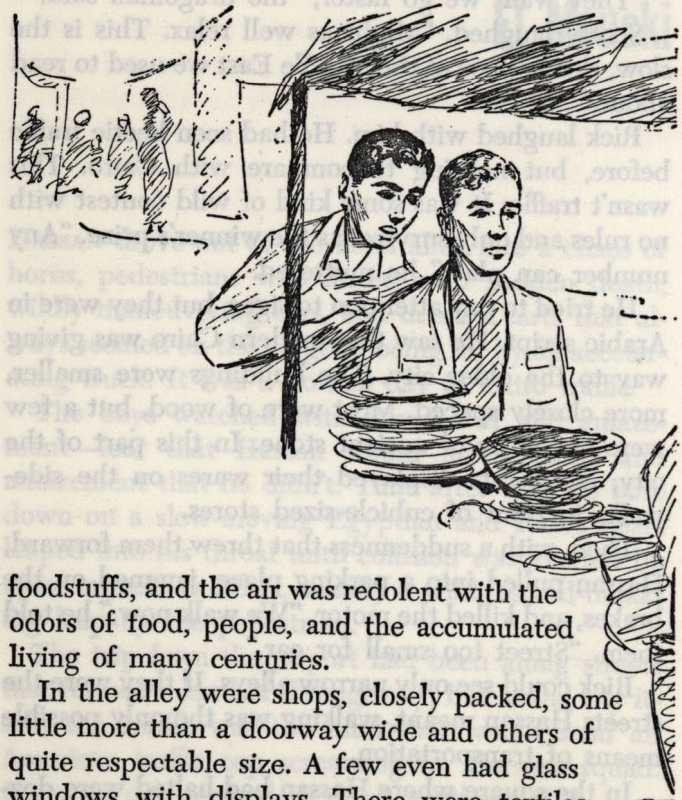
Then, with a suddenness that threw them forward, Hassan pulled into a parking place, jammed on the brakes, and killed the motor. "We walk now," he told them. "Street too small for car."

Rick could see only narrow alleys. If they were the streets Hassan meant, walking was the only possible means of transportation.

In the square where Hassan had halted were dozens of merchants, some with their wares in carts, others carrying them on their backs. A rug merchant approached and Hassan waved him off. "Come. El

Mouski over there." He pointed to a narrow alleyway.

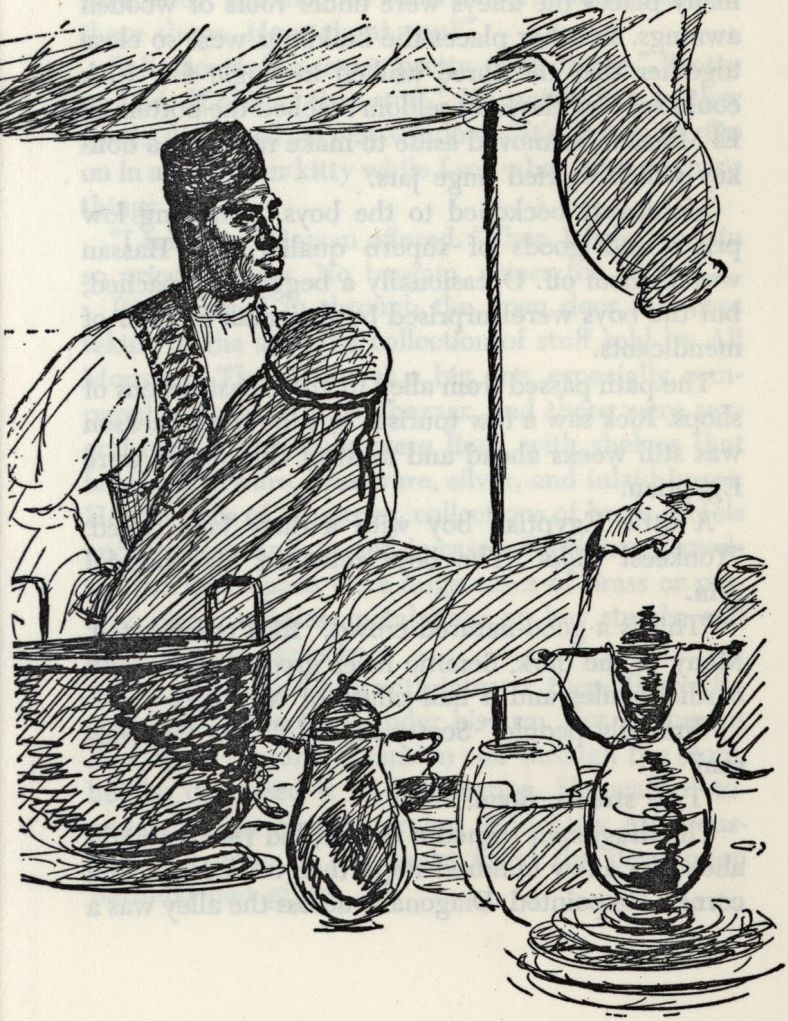
The boys followed, eyes taking in the sights, smells, and noises. Merchants hawked their wares with raucous cries, charcoal braziers smoked under assorted



foodstuffs, and the air was redolent with the odors of food, people, and the accumulated living of many centuries.

In the alley were shops, closely packed, some little more than a doorway wide and others of quite respectable size. A few even had glass windows with displays. There were textiles, foodstuffs, tinned copper, brass, leather goods, inlaid work, rugs, shoes of strange designs, clothing, and a variety of antiques.

Hassan stopped before a cubicle crowded with interesting brassware and spoke in Arabic to a dark man with tiny spectacles. Rick thought he heard the name of Ali Moustafa. He waited while the merchant



replied at length, with much waving of the hands as he outlined the path to the establishment.

"I know now," Hassan informed them. "We go."

Rick and Scotty fell in step with the guide. In many places the alleys were under roofs or wooden awnings. In other places the buildings were so close together that the three walked in single file. Rick could see that daylight seldom reached the bottom of El Mouski. He moved aside to make room for a donkey which carried huge jars.

Merchants beckoned to the boys, promising low prices and goods of superb quality, but Hassan waved them off. Occasionally a beggar approached, but the boys were surprised by the small number of mendicants.

The path passed from alley to alley, past dozens of shops. Rick saw a few tourists, but the tourist season was still weeks ahead and most of the people were Egyptian.

A little Egyptian boy with a dirty face called, "Yonkees! 'Ello!" The boys returned his cheerful grin.

"This is a good-natured crowd," Rick commented. Many of the dark, Semitic faces greeted them with cordial smiles and a half-salute of welcome.

"Friendly people," Scotty agreed. "How far, Hassan?"

"Two streets. Soon."

The dragoman turned a corner, led them straight ahead for a few hundred steps, then turned a second corner. He pointed. Diagonally across the alley was a

large store with display windows. A sign over the door carried the name ALI MOUSTAFA surrounded by Arabic script.

"We'll get rid of the cat, then do some shopping," Rick said. "I'm anxious for a closer look at some of these shops. How about you?"

"Ali Moustafa's seems pretty good to me," Scotty replied. "Look at that stuff." He pointed to leather goods displayed in one window. "It's beautiful. Go on in and deliver kitty while I see what some of these things are."

"I tell you," Hassan offered. "Then I help bargain so prices be low. No bargain, prices too high."

Rick walked in through the open door, his eyes taking in the amazing collection of stuff sold by Ali Moustafa. The store was a big one, especially compared with most in the bazaar, and there were several clerks. The walls were lined with shelves that held copperware, brassware, silver, and inlaid boxes. He saw rolls of tapestries, collections of brass camels and donkeys, and glassed-in cases of jewelry. Crowding the floor space were huge vases of brass or pottery, camel saddles, metal trays on low stands, and huge leather hassocks.

The clerks eyed him with interest, then all eyes focused on the package under his arm. For a moment Rick felt a current of tension run through the store, but he dismissed it as imagination. He walked toward the rear counter, trying to identify Ali Moustafa, but none of the clerks fitted the description Bartouki had given.

He addressed his question to the clerk behind the rearmost counter. "Is Mr. Moustafa here?"

The clerk's dark eyes flickered, and his face became expressionless. "Please to be seated. I will get him."

The clerk vanished through a curtained door at the rear of the store, and Rick turned. He was sensitive to impressions, and he was again conscious of the tension. As he turned he saw that all the clerks were watching him, their faces impassive. His eyes went to the front of the store. Scotty was with Hassan in the doorway, discussing some object in the display window.

A voice spoke from behind him. "You wish to see me?"

Rick turned. The newcomer was a tall, well-built Egyptian with glossy black hair and a military mustache. Unblinking black eyes met his gaze, and there was no hint of welcome in them.

"Are you Ali Moustafa?" Rick asked.

The man bowed a quarter of an inch. "At your service," he said.

Rick didn't know what to say. Bartouki had described a huge, jolly fat man, like Santa Claus without a beard. This man was big, but not huge, not fat, and definitely not jolly.

For a moment Rick hesitated, then asked, "Is there another Ali Moustafa in the bazaar?"

The black eyes locked with his. "There is no other. I am the only Ali Moustafa. And you? If you are Mr. Brant from America, I have been expecting you.

Bartouki said you would deliver a package. Is it the one under your arm perhaps?"

Rick didn't like this at all. Even if the description had been exaggerated in some respects, this cold conversation was scarcely a cordial welcome. Yet, the man knew about the cat, and about Bartouki. Something was wrong. He wanted to deliver the cat as he had promised, but he had no intention of turning it over to the wrong man.

"I have a package," he returned evenly. "I'm sorry it can't be delivered now. The man who receives it will have to identify himself without question as the proper Ali Moustafa."

The man shrugged. "You came to my shop. The sign tells you who I am. There is no other Ali Moustafa. So, I will accept delivery of the cat, if you please."

Rick shook his head. "Sorry."

The man spoke in Arabic and took a step forward. Sensing movement behind him, Rick whirled.

The clerks were moving to block his way!

Rick reacted with lightning speed. He yelled, "Scotty!"

Scotty sensed the urgency of the call and jumped into the doorway.

Rick lifted the Egyptian cat and rifled a pass through the closing ranks of clerks. Scotty snatched the cat out of the air. Rick followed through with a battering charge that sent a clerk caroming into a stack of copper jars. They went down with a clatter. Another clerk reached out and Rick gave him a

straight arm that cleared the way long enough for a jump to the outside.

"Run!" he yelled.

Hassan had been standing with mouth open, astonished at the proceedings. Now, as a clerk charged through the door, the dragoman flung himself sideways in a beautiful body block that sent the clerk back into the store with a crash. Then the three were rounding the corner at top speed, pushing through the people in the street.

From behind them came a shouted command in Arabic. A figure in a long, dirty robe stepped into Scotty's path and grabbed for the cat. The boy tossed a lateral pass to Rick, who tucked the package under his arm. Scotty's hand lashed out and his open palm caught the Arab under the chin. The man lifted inches into the air and his head thudded audibly against a brick wall. He lost all interest in the proceedings.

Hassan led the way like a charging lineman, with Rick in his wake. Scotty fell back a few paces to prevent attack from behind. But in spite of a few yells from the rear, no one else menaced them. The people of the bazaar obviously were curious, but not involved.

Rick had a fleeting thought that a pair of obvious foreigners running at top speed through a department store at home would arouse some curiosity, too. He grinned, in spite of his bewilderment. Then they were at the car. Hassan wheeled the little sedan around in almost its own length and charged through

the crowded streets like a miniature juggernaut, heading back to the hotel.

A short time later over *café au lait,* part coffee and part hot milk, the boys and Hassan held a half-angry, half-amused post mortem. There had been no opportunity in the car for real conversation because of the sheer adventure of rocketing through impossible traffic at equally impossible speed. Rick had reported briefly to Scotty, and that was all.

Scotty took a sip from his steaming cup and turned to Hassan. "You ever play football?"

Hassan stumbled over the word. "Footsball? What are footsball?"

"Never mind." Scotty grinned. "The way you took that clerk out, I thought you might have played blocking back for the Green Bay Packers."

The dragoman's bewilderment deepened. Rick came to his rescue. "Football is an American game, Hassan. It is rough. The Green Bay Packers is the name of a famous professional football team."

"One thing is for sure," Scotty offered. "The clerks didn't know football. That flat pass you threw was good for plenty of yardage."

"It made a touchdown," Rick pointed out. He changed the subject. "Look, what went on in that store, anyway? I don't know who the big man was, but he wasn't Ali Moustafa. At least he didn't come close to Bartouki's description."

"Why didn't you give him the cat, anyway?" Scotty asked with a grin. "Afraid a brand-new mys-

tery might end without you getting a piece of it?"

Rick grinned back. "Not a bad idea, now that you mention it. I didn't think of it at the time. The only thing I knew for sure was that I wasn't going to hand over any helpless little pussycat to a guy with eyes like that. He'd mistreat it."

"Uhuh. Only, now what do we do with the cat?"

"Give it to the right Ali Moustafa," Rick said. "There must be a right one somewhere."

Scotty waved his arm in a gesture that took in all of Egypt, half of the Sudan, and most of Libya. "Help yourself. I'll bet there are ten thousand Ali Moustafas around. How do you find the right one?"

Rick didn't try to answer. Instead, he asked Hassan, "Could there be another Ali Moustafa in El Mouski?"

The guide shook his head. "I ask my friend when we stop. He say there is only one, and he tell me how we get there."

Rick's brows furrowed. "Then that must be the shop Bartouki meant. Only where was big, fat, jolly Ali Moustafa? Or could I be wrong about the description?"

Scotty was definite. "Not a chance. I remember the description the way you do. Either Bartouki didn't know his own partner, or the man you saw was not Ali Moustafa—unless he took off weight and shaved his beard. And changed his disposition in the bargain."

"Which brings us back to the question before the house. What do we do with the Egyptian cat?"

"Give it to Hassan," Scotty suggested with a smile.

The dragoman's pleasant black face assumed an air of great sadness. "Cat's nice," he said. "But no can take. Too much cost for food."

Rick smiled at the joke, then suddenly he realized Hassan was not joking. He was genuinely sad! He took the package from his lap and held it up. "Hassan, what do you think is in here?"

The dragoman shrugged. "You say cat. I believe."

Scotty asked incredulously, "Didn't you think carrying a cat wrapped in paper was pretty strange?"

Hassan smiled apologetically. "Americans many time do thing I not understand."

Rick choked back laughter with a heroic effort and almost strangled. Scotty found a handkerchief and blew his nose violently.

"Pretty strong coffee," Rick managed finally.

Scotty nodded, struggling to keep a straight face. Neither of them wanted to risk hurting the guide's feelings.

"Hassan," Rick said at last, "even American science couldn't keep a live, wide-awake cat quiet in a paper parcel. This cat is a model, a statue. You see?"

For an instant Hassan stared, then he rocked back, his white teeth flashed, and he shouted with laughter. The boys broke down, too, and in a moment the entire patronage of the coffee shop was staring at the three idiots who roared with unrestrained laughter in public. Such behavior in Americans was to be deplored, perhaps, but understandable. But a licensed dragoman . . . incredible!

When they had quieted down, Rick summed it up. "Well, Hassan knows what's in the package now, but that's the only new bit of information any of us has. We still don't know exactly what happened in the bazaar, or why. And we don't know what to do with the cat."

He felt the cat through the heavy paper, as though to reassure himself it was there. Suddenly he didn't want to get rid of it quite so urgently, and inwardly he laughed at himself. A mystery was one thing he couldn't ignore.

"I hope I'm wrong," he concluded thoughtfully, "but I have a hunch this little plastic feline is going to be more trouble than the liveliest real cat you ever saw!"

CHAPTER V

# Sahara Wells

HASSAN arrived during breakfast on the following morning. His colorful costume had given way to European clothes, except for a tarboosh. He wore a topcoat.

At Rick's invitation he joined the boys on the balcony overlooking the Nile, and accepted the offer of coffee. Rick went to the novel push-bell system which had three buttons identified by pictures. One was a porter, another the room maid, and the third a waiter. The little drawings were for the benefit of strangers who knew neither Arabic nor English.

Rick rang for the waiter and ordered more coffee and a cup for the dragoman.

Hassan shed his topcoat and grinned at the boys. "Cat catch mouse last night?"

"No mouse," Scotty replied. "The cat just caught some sleep. And so did we."

Hassan puzzled out the reply, then smiled his appreciation.

Rick thought that the cat hadn't even caught any interest—at least from the scientists. At dinner he and Scotty had described the incident at El Mouski

to Winston and the Egyptian scientists. The scientists had only one suggestion, to the effect that perhaps the boys' imaginations had run away with them.

It was obvious that the scientists were far more interested in the problem of the radio telescope than in listening to tales of wild adventure in the bazaar, so the boys let the matter drop. They had excused themselves immediately after dinner and turned in, tired from the long plane trip and the day's excitement.

Rick had gone over the events at the bazaar a dozen times. He had compared notes with Scotty on what Bartouki had told them. Clearly, something was pretty strange about the whole affair. It was simply inconceivable that Bartouki would have given an inaccurate description of Ali Moustafa, so the man in the store had not been Bartouki's partner. Yet, he had known about the cat, and had called Rick by name. Who was he? And where was the real Ali Moustafa? There were no answers, at least for the present. But Rick didn't intend to give up.

He motioned to Hassan's coat. "Is it cold out today?"

"Yes. Good you wear coats when we go out. Later it will be warm, then cool again when sun goes."

The boys had decided to keep Hassan as a guide and driver during their entire stay. The dragoman's services were not expensive, and besides, both of them felt they had found a friend. The way Hassan had pitched in at the bazaar, with no questions asked and their interests obviously at heart, had been a fine

example of professional loyalty coupled with a quick mind and fast reflexes.

After breakfast the boys went to the wardrobe and took out the coats they had brought. Rick's was brand new, a Christmas present from his father. It was a short, hip-length woolen coat that could double as a hunting jacket. In addition to the big outer pockets, it had inner game pockets lined with a leatherlike plastic. It was warm, but light. He was thoroughly pleased with it.

Scotty slipped into his own short coat, much like Rick's except for the game pockets. Then the ex-Marine motioned to the Egyptian cat, unwrapped and sitting in elegant repose on the writing desk. "What about Felix?" he asked.

Rick went over and picked up the cat. "We'd better take it along, I guess. It might get lonesome. Or we might run over Ali Moustafa on the way to the project." He slid the cat into an inner pocket. It fit with room to spare.

Scotty asked Hassan, with mock seriousness, "You know Sahara Wells?"

Hassan answered with equal seriousness. "Know Sahara Wells well."

The ride was an interesting one, up the Nile to a bridge different from the one they had crossed en route from the airport, along roads with a palm-shaded center strip, past mosques, stores, and airy, modern apartment houses. There was less traffic than in downtown Cairo, and Hassan went faster.

Scotty muttered, "Fewer close calls today."

Rick winced as the car almost scraped a woman with a basket of fruit balanced on her head. "Fewer, but closer."

The costumes on the street were mixed. There were many people, including women, in Western dress, but there were also many women in cloaks, and men in the traditional Arab *bornoss,* the enveloping robe called a burnoose in English. For the first time, the boys saw several men in blue gowns, and Rick asked Hassan what they were.

"*Fellahin,*" Hassan replied. "How you say? Farmers. From country. Man tell me that is where your word 'fella' come from."

Rick looked with new interest. He had heard of the *fellahin,* the farmer-peasants of Egypt. Many of them lived and worked as their ancestors had centuries ago, plowing with wooden plows, living in mud-and-wattle houses. They represented the past of Egypt, as installations like the atomic energy plant at En-Shass, or Inchass as it was sometimes called, represented the future.

There were soldiers along the route, too, dressed in British-style brown uniforms. Some carried Sten guns, vicious little submachine guns originally of English manufacture.

"Why the soldiers?" Scotty asked.

"Camp near," Hassan replied.

And then, abruptly, the boys lost interest in people, because looming ahead, like something from a travel movie, was a pyramid!

Hassan rounded a corner and another pyramid

came into view. They were enormous, Rick thought. He hadn't expected anything so huge. "Are we at Giza already?" he asked.

"This Giza," Hassan agreed. He pronounced it more like *Gizeh.*

"I always thought the pyramids were out in the desert," Scotty objected.

"Is true," Hassan said. "You will see."

They did, within minutes. The terrain changed from the green, fertile, Nile Valley to the bleak Sahara as though cut by a giant knife. For the first time, Rick understood the phrase "Egypt, gift of the Nile." Where the yearly Nile overflow brought fertile silt and moisture, there was lush green land. Where the overflow stopped, the desert began. No intermediate ground lay between. Egypt consisted of the Nile Valley and the desert, with nothing in between.

The road crossed the dividing line and they were in the Sahara Desert. Hassan drove between houses of faded red clay and tan stucco, unlike the modern apartments a few hundred yards back. It was as though they had driven into a different country. Children, goats, chickens, and Arab adults scattered before the car. It was a typical desert-country scene, and right at the edge of modern Cairo!

Hassan turned a sharp corner and Giza lay before them, up a gradual, rising slope.

In the immediate foreground was the Sphinx. Rick's first impression was that it was disappointingly small, as the great pyramids behind it were

truly enormous. He could see all three Giza pyramids now.

Then he realized that his impressions had been gained entirely from pictures—and to an extent, the pictures had been false. The Sphinx, always shown in the foreground of pictures or taken from a low angle, loomed large in the camera lenses, with the pyramids looking relatively small in the distant background.

Human vision set the image straight, abruptly. The Sphinx was small, but only in comparison to the pyramids. Actually, it was a monument of heroic proportions.

"Please stop," Rick called, and Hassan did, with skidding wheels. The boys got out and stood gazing, in mixed awe and delight. This was the Egypt of antiquity, Rick thought. These were the monuments of a civilization already ancient when the Old Testament was new, monuments engineered with astounding precision when Rick's Anglo-Saxon forebears were still building crude shelters of mud and reeds.

Scotty's nudge aroused Rick from his reverie, and he turned for a close-up of his first live camel, not counting circuses or zoos. The camel was such a vision of homely awkwardness that Rick had to laugh.

The cameleer led the beast to where a party of tourists, obviously American, waited. The boys watched as the animal came to a halt. The driver bowed to the party. Then, taking a thin stick, he tapped the camel on bony knees that were wrapped in worn burlap. Instantly the camel let out a heart-

rending groan. Its ungainly legs folded like a poorly designed beach chair, and moaning in pure anguish, it knelt.

A lady tourist, giggling self-consciously, climbed up on the blanket-covered saddle. The camel let out a louder groan, one filled with such phony pain and despair that the boys burst out laughing. A tap of the driver's stick and the camel lurched to its feet, hind legs first like a cow. The lady tourist squealed mightily, the camel wailed in protest, the other tourists cheered, and the boys doubled with laughter.

Rick asked, still chuckling, "Hassan, do camels always complain like that?"

"Is true. They nasty and plenty noisy. They hate work. Driver makes them carry tourists and they holler plenty."

The camel quieted down to a low-voiced grumble. He was letting the world know that the arrangement was not pleasing and that he didn't intend to suffer in silence. Cameras began to snap, recording for the folks back home the undignified ride of the lady tourist on the ungainly camel before the ancient, majestic pyramids and the changeless, unsmiling Sphinx.

The three got back into the little car and Hassan took a road that curved gradually around a hill, past a hotel that he identified as the Mena House, and up to the largest pyramid, once the tomb of Khufu and still the greatest monument in all the world.

On a line into the desert were the slightly smaller pyramids of Kefren and Mankara. These, with the

Sphinx, were among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Later, Rick promised Scotty, they would explore Giza and its wonders inch by inch. But now they were due at Sahara Wells. Hassan sped around the Khufu pyramid and pointed. There, on the horizon, was a strange contrast to the monuments of the Pharaohs. The steel-and-aluminum shape of the great, steerable dish antenna, designed for modern astronomy, was silhouetted against the sky.

Rick was excited. He enjoyed new sights and experiences more than most people, and here, within sight of each other, were unique objects of almost equal interest, but entirely different.

The way led past a single large building surrounded by shabby tents, and a sign in English and Arabic that proclaimed that this was Sahara Wells. Then the blacktop road curved out into the desert to the great radio telescope.

Hassan drove into a parking lot before the main project building in the shadow of the antenna and Dr. Hakim Farid came out to greet the boys.

"Welcome to Sahara Wells," he said cordially. "How do you like our baby?"

Rick looked up at the huge dish. "It's a good mate for the pyramids," he said.

"Pretty impressive," Scotty added.

"We hope its performance will be impressive, too, once we get this bug ironed out. Come on in. Winston and Kerama are hard at work."

The boys followed him into the building, while

Hassan squatted in the sun next to his car. The door opened directly into the main control room, a bewildering confusion of panels, instruments, and controls. There were several scientists and technicians clustered around Winston and Kerama. The group was studying Sanborn tracings, continuous graphs showing the lines traced by the incoming signals.

Farid introduced the boys to the staff, then took them on a quick tour. He showed them the controls for the great dish. They were fully automatic. The operator needed only to set the co-ordinates for the part of the sky to be examined, then clock mechanisms of remarkable precision would keep the telescope on target until the target sank below the horizon.

The boys examined banks of amplifiers that would turn faint signals into usable ones. The latest techniques had been used to ensure maximum performance.

Outside, Farid showed them the self-contained diesel-electric power plant. They stood directly under the massive concrete mount for the great dish and marveled at its size. The main bearings on which it moved were bigger around than Scotty was tall, yet the whole affair was so delicately balanced that a tiny electric motor could control it with fantastic precision.

Still under construction were offices and barracks. The latter would allow the scientists to stay there for days at a time when working on particular projects.

The offices were nearly done, and plasterers were at work, but the forms for the barracks floor were just being completed. The pouring of concrete would start on the following day.

Rick looked at the pyramids on the horizon and contrasted this scene of construction with the one that had produced the great tombs. Then, it was only men—thousands of them. Today, it was a handful of skilled workers plus machinery.

"Now," Farid said, "let's get back to the control room. Kerama is going to review the situation for the staff. Some of them are new on the job."

As Farid and the boys rejoined the others, Dr. Kerama was pointing to a series of peaks on the Sanborn tracings. "You will note that these peaks occur at intervals, with the spacing apparently random. The main sequence of noise out of which the peaks rise is the 21-centimeter hydrogen line. Notice also that the peaks have nearly identical amplitudes. Obviously, the source is neutral hydrogen, which is to say hydrogen in its normal form, not ionized as we find it in plasma in a star's atmosphere. Our problem is simply to locate the source of the peaks. Somewhere in the circuit there seems to be an effect that serves to modulate the incoming signal. Our antenna will be useless unless we eliminate this interference so that the signal can be pure once again."

Rick had seen Sanborn tracings before. The system was a standard method of recording. His first experience with it had been in making permanent records of telemetered signals from rockets.

A technician asked, "Sir, do these peaks occur no matter how the antenna is pointing?"

Kerama shook his head. "No. If you will examine the peaks in terms of time and the co-ordinates, you will see that they began at a particular point during a sweep of the sky. Our first thought was that we had picked up some source emitting pulsed signals, but the source is apparently moving. This is why we concluded the difficulty was in our system, since no sky source moves with such angular velocity."

The Egyptian scientist began giving assignments. Rick and Scotty were given a test kit and put to work checking a part of the circuit one wire at a time. It was slow, difficult work, requiring great care.

It was warm in the control room. Rick hung up his coat, pausing to touch the Egyptian cat in his pocket. He hadn't thought of the little beast for some time. What was he to do with it? From a simple delivery job, as a favor to an acquaintance, the cat had become a problem. Rick couldn't resist a mystery, but this one had him stopped cold for the time being. He didn't know what to do next. The only solution that had occurred to him was to send a cable to Bartouki, to ask for further instructions.

He shrugged and put the problem aside, and went back to helping Scotty.

It was late before Kerama called a halt. The boys rode back to the hotel with Hassan, grateful for the relief of concentrating on thousands of tiny wires. They told the dragoman to go on home, then went into the dining room for dinner before retiring for

the night. Winston, who never seemed to tire when working, had stayed with Kerama and Farid to continue discussions of possible sources of trouble.

After dinner Rick picked up their key at the hotel desk and they rode the tiny elevator to their floor. They opened up and went in. Rick locked the door while Scotty snapped on the lights.

Scotty let out a sudden yell! Rick whirled and gasped. The room was a shambles. Every drawer was open and their contents were dumped out on the floor. Their suitcases had been left open. The bedclothes were in a heap in the middle of the room, and the mattresses were on the floor.

Rick glanced at the key in his hand and realized that it was a very ordinary type; master keys that would allow a thief access could be bought in any hardware store. He followed Scotty to the closet and saw that their clothes had been searched and dropped carelessly. Nothing was left on the hangers.

The room had been searched inch by inch, and by someone in a hurry.

Rick's hand went to the Egyptian cat in his pocket.

"They wanted the cat," he said slowly. "I can't see that anything is missing. But why is the cat so important?"

He drew it out of his pocket and stared at it. Then his eyes met Scotty's. His pal shrugged. Neither of them had even the slightest clue.

CHAPTER VI

# The Cat Has Kittens

THE sun blazed down on Sahara Wells. In the distance the pyramids looked hazy, and beyond them Cairo was a thin line of green and brown along the Nile. It was fairly warm in the sun, but a cool wind blew across the desert and coats were comfortable.

Rick and Scotty sat on a box under the antenna while Hassan squatted and watched them. For the moment there was nothing for them to do. The scientists were occupied with calculations, and neither boy could make a contribution to high mathematics of the kind used in radio astronomy.

Rick was glad of the break. His mind hadn't been on the job, anyway—it had been on the Egyptian cat. For perhaps the hundredth time he asked, "Why is the cat valuable? Why would anyone want it enough to stage that scene at El Mouski and then ransack our room?"

Scotty had no answers, but he had some questions of his own. "What I want to know is, did the hall porter just happen to step out at the right moment for the thief? Or is he in the act somehow?"

"It really doesn't make much difference," Rick pointed out. "He might have been paid to take a walk, but that doesn't mean he knows anything."

"Okay. Try this one. Where is the real Ali Moustafa?"

"Good question. Now I'll ask one. What do we do next?"

"You could cable Bartouki, or even phone him," Scotty replied. "You said you had thought about it."

Rick hesitated. He tried to put his reluctance into words. "I just don't think getting in touch with Bartouki is the right thing to do. I don't know why. Call it a hunch."

Scotty had a deep respect for Rick's hunches. They had a way of turning out to be right. He remembered a description of a hunch Rick had once used and repeated it. "A hunch is only a conscious conclusion based on subconscious data you don't know you have. Isn't that about it?"

Rick looked at him. "What are you driving at?"

"What data are buried in your subconscious that make you distrust Bartouki?"

"I didn't say I mistrusted him."

Scotty shrugged. "No, but you must, if you don't think it's right to call him."

Rick had to admit Scotty was probably right. What basis did he have for mistrusting the charming little Egyptian merchant? Certainly Bartouki had been nice to them, so carrying the cat to Egypt had been only common courtesy.

Experience had shown Rick that very often he

could get ideas from reviewing conversations. He walked away from Hassan and Scotty and stared at the construction details of the antenna. But he wasn't really looking. Instead, he was trying to recall the entire scene leading up to his acceptance of the cat.

Bartouki had explained its importance. He had said it was needed. Now, what had led Barby to offer Rick's services as a messenger? The merchant had said that he was anxious to get it to Egypt, but that the Christmas mails were crowded. The Christmas mails . . . that didn't seem like much of a reason for not sending it by air freight. Bartouki could have delivered it personally to Idlewild Terminal, to avoid getting it mixed up with the domestic mail. . . .

"I've got it!" he yelled. He hurried over and stood in front of Scotty and Hassan. "Listen, who sends mail at Christmas time?"

Scotty's brows wrinkled. "Everyone, I guess."

"Not everyone." Rick warmed to his idea. "There are plenty of people who wait until the last few days before Christmas, but where are they? In America! Anyone overseas who sends a package home tries to get it in the mail early. Wouldn't you say so?"

"Maybe they should, but I suspect they don't. People are always waiting until the last moment."

"But is the overseas airmail so crowded you wouldn't trust a parcel to the regular mail system?"

Scotty shook his head. "I doubt it. What are you getting at?"

But Rick had an even better argument to bolster the case he was developing. "Christmas mail is to

and from Christians, isn't it? Sure! Egypt is a Moslem country. Moslems don't send Christmas cards or presents, and they don't get them, either. The Christians in Egypt are Coptic—anyway, they don't celebrate Christmas the same way. So why would the airmail to Egypt be jammed?"

Hassan spoke up. "It not so heavy. My brother is letter carrier, and he no work very hard on *Nasrani* holiday. Nasrani is what we call Christian."

"I think you've got something," Scotty agreed. "Bartouki could have mailed the cat, but for some reason he wanted a messenger . . ."

". . . and we walked right into it," Rick finished. "Chances are that's why he showed us the cat in the first place."

"Barby had the bright idea," Scotty reminded. "Bartouki wasn't the one who suggested it."

"He didn't have to," Rick pointed out. "If she hadn't, I'll bet he would have led around to it some other way."

Scotty held up his hands in surrender. "I'll buy it. Bartouki needed a messenger. Why?"

Rick sat down on the box again. Why, indeed? He knew now why he distrusted Bartouki, but he had no idea of the merchant's reasons. He glared at his pal. "Kill-joy. So we get back to the basic question. What does kitty have that people want?"

He took the statue from his pocket and examined it closely, as he had done several times before. The bright sunlight disclosed nothing but a perfect bit of casting. He took out the pocket lens he carried for

examination of specimens that might be useful in his hobby of microscopy, but magnification showed him nothing. It was a flawless job.

"I'm stumped," he admitted. "Come on. Let's stretch our legs before we get called back in to go to work."

Scotty and Hassan joined him as he walked toward the barracks where cement was being poured to form the floor. Scotty borrowed the cat for a quick look, then handed it back. Rick stowed it in his pocket.

"Whatever kitty's got, it's pretty interesting to some people," Scotty commented. "Otherwise, why go to all the trouble of trying to get it in the bazaar, then taking the risk of searching our room?"

Rick said what had been on his mind. "I have another happy thought for you. If they really want the cat, they'll try again."

"Whoever 'they' are," Scotty agreed. "Let me add a cheery note of my own while we're at it. They won't have to get the best detectives in the world to figure out that you've got the creature, either. If it isn't in the hotel room, it's on you."

Rick mulled that one over as they watched the workmen smoothing the poured concrete in the form. Would it be better if he disposed of the cat? But how could he? He couldn't leave it at the project, even though it was locked at night. The lock wouldn't stop professional thieves. He couldn't give the cat to one of the scientists, because that would expose them to the thieves, too. He could have it put

in the hotel vault, but what assurance had he that it would be safe there? It occurred to him that he would have entrusted his valuables to the hotel vault with no hesitation, but the cat was different, somehow. He just didn't want it out of his hands until he knew more about it.

Hassan said idly, "Cement color like cat."

Rick's thoughts snapped back to the scene before him. The dragoman was right. The concrete mix had been colored to imitate sandstone, apparently a part of the plan to make the architecture as Egyptian as possible. There was enough of the mix in the form to make a thousand cats, and more was being mixed in a portable cement mixer.

The Great Idea took shape in his mind, and suddenly he laughed outright. "Kittens!" he exclaimed. "Wouldn't that throw them for a loop? I mean, if several Egyptian cats showed up."

Scotty laughed with him. "It definitely would. We'll show 'em that it doesn't pay to confuse us. Only how do we do it?"

Rick pointed to the office building where the plasterers were still at work. "Make a plaster cast, then use the concrete mix for the models. How about it?"

"Could work," Scotty said quickly. "Come on."

They rummaged around through the construction debris and found a pair of small wooden boxes that had held instruments. With Hassan as interpreter, Rick talked to the construction foreman and a plasterer was detailed to help. If the form could be prepared right away, the low desert humidity would

harden it enough to use by the time they were through work.

The wooden boxes were filled with soft plaster while Rick coated the Egyptian cat with oil used to lubricate the antenna bearings. The cat was pushed into one box until only half of it showed. The plasterer smoothed the surface around the cat.

A sheet of scrap metal was used as a lid for the second box of plaster. Working quickly, the plasterer turned it upside down and held it in position while Scotty slipped the metal out of the way. The plasterer pushed it down on the cat, losing only a little plaster in the process. The little statue was now firmly embedded in plaster.

By the time the boys were summoned to the control room again, the plaster was firm enough so the plasterer could run a thin wire between the two boxes to start the process of separation. When the plaster was a little harder, he would use the wire and a long knife to separate the two halves completely.

The boys went to work, checking various elements under Winston's direction. They kept at it until late afternoon. The sun was slanting down behind the pyramids when they were told to knock off for the day.

They hurried to the plaster mold at once. Hassan was already there, waiting, with the plasterer. The Sudanese guide pointed to a batch of concrete in a wooden tub. "We mix, more dry than for the floor, so easier to make cats. Now we start?"

"Any time," Rick said. "Thanks, Hassan." The re-

sourceful dragoman had realized the concrete mix being used for the floor was too liquid for easy handling and had prepared a drier batch.

The plasterer went to work at once. He worked rapidly but skillfully, using the wire and knife to cut through the plaster until he reached the cat. Rick worried that he might cut or scratch the original, but the Egyptian was deft. In a few moments he lifted the upper box and the cat came to light, still gleaming from its coating of oil. Rick lifted it out of its plaster bed. The two boxes now contained perfect half impressions.

The boys, Hassan, and the workman shook hands all around. It was a job well done. The rest was easy. Rick oiled the form while the plasterer put the new concrete mix through a screen to remove lumps, then the two halves were filled slightly overfull and put together. Pressure was applied simply by standing on the upper box.

The workman lifted the upper box off with great care, disclosing a perfect half-cat in fresh concrete. The dry mixture kept its shape, but made great care necessary. The Egyptian workman held out both hands and Hassan turned the bottom box over. Working gently, the plasterer released the casting from the mold. It dropped into his hands. The boys watched eagerly as he used his knife to trim the flashing from the cat replica, then he wet his fingers from a bucket and smoothed out a few rough spots. The man grinned with pleasure, and the boys grinned back.

"Perfect," Scotty said.

Rick added, "If I didn't know its mother personally, I'd think this was it."

The first kitten was put gently aside to dry while others were cast. The next two castings broke, but three perfect kittens resulted from six tries.

Rick was satisfied. "By tomorrow they'll be hard," he said with a grin. "Then we'll work out a cat distribution program. I may go back to El Mouski and hand one to the phony Ali Moustafa, just to see what happens."

"Not while I'm healthy enough to stop you," Scotty said positively. Then he grinned, too. "But there's nothing more fun than kittens, and we'll have plenty of laughs with these. You wait and see!"

CHAPTER VII

# The Egyptian Museum

RICK hung up the room phone and joined Scotty at the breakfast table. The ex-Marine was munching on a Lebanese tangerine and watching the Nile boats below.

"Farid says to take the morning off," Rick reported. "The scientists are about convinced that the signal isn't internal receiver noise, but that leaves them up a tree. If part of the circuit isn't causing the trouble, what is?"

Scotty waved his hand at the scene across the Nile where a great concrete tower rose into the sky. "It's this land. Look at it. There's a tower for television. A couple of miles away are the pyramids. Down the street is a new office building with aluminum walls, and it's right next to a stone mosque that's nearly as old as the city. If you ask me, Horus or Thoth or one of the old Egyptian gods is getting fed up and messing with the signal just for the fun of it."

Rick knew exactly how Scotty felt. The remarkable blend of the very old and the ultramodern was visible everywhere in Cairo. But somehow the two

did not conflict, probably because the Egyptians had been wise in their choice of architecture.

"Maybe we'd better burn some incense and do a chant or two," Rick suggested. "How's this? Oh, Osiris, son of Isis, please get the bugs out of our antenna."

"That's no fit chant," Scotty objected. "A chant should rhyme, shouldn't it?"

Rick searched his memory for incantations to Egyptian gods, but there had been none in the books Bartouki had given them, although the gods had been described. He improvised quickly. "Then how's this?"

He took a pinch of sugar from the bowl and sprinkled it on Scotty's head as an offering to the gods, then bowed like a high priest and chanted:

*"Anubis, Horus, Amon-Ré,*
*Are you near or far away?*
*If you're tuned in close at hand,*
*Clean up the H-emission band."*

The piece of hard Egyptian bread thrown by Scotty caught him just behind the ear. Rick picked it up and threw it back, grinning.

"The things I have to put up with," Scotty exclaimed hopelessly. "I'm sorry I brought the whole thing up."

"It didn't help," Rick admitted. "But it gave me an idea. How about going to the Egyptian Museum this morning?"

"With Hassan?"

"It's right across the park. Hassan can take the morning off and come back after lunch to drive us to the project."

"I'm your boy," Scotty agreed. "If you keep your chants to yourself, that is. Try one on those old statues at the museum and they'd fall on you."

"Oh, I don't know," Rick said loftily. "Maybe those old Egyptians had a better ear for poetry than you have."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Scotty returned. "If it sounds so terrible to me, think what it would sound like to a poetry lover. Go on and make your phone call."

Rick did. He asked the desk to relay a message to Hassan, then asked about the weather. The clerk spent a minute apologizing profusely. It was chilly, he admitted reluctantly. Very unusual for Egypt. Hadn't happened since 1898. Most regrettable. And so on.

"He sounded like a Sunshine Tourist Service trouble shooter explaining that the downpour was only a heavy mist," Rick said as he hung up. "The weather is unusual, remarkable, etc. It's chilly."

Scotty finished his coffee. "Okay. Let's go. Got the kitty?"

Rick took the Egyptian cat from its nest under his mattress and put it into the inner pocket of his coat. "Couldn't leave our pal, could we? Bad man might get 'im."

"We can't let that happen until we find out why the animal is so appealing," Scotty agreed.

"Spoken like a true Spindrifter. Do we walk, or take the elevator? Walking's faster, but the elevator is more adventurous."

"Walk," Scotty said. "You need the exercise."

Outside, the air was pleasantly crisp, but the sun was shining. Rick wondered if it ever rained in Cairo and made a mental note to look it up. He had brought a guidebook with him, and the map showed them the location of the museum.

They started off at a brisk pace, past the Nile Hilton Hotel, then across the heavy traffic of the bridge circle to the open park before the museum. As Rick turned to look at a statue he caught a glimpse of a figure dodging behind some shrubbery. His pulse speeded.

"Could be that we have a buddy," he announced. "I saw someone dodge behind a bush."

Scotty took a quick look without seeming to. "Someone there all right. A pal of our little cat?"

"It's certainly no chum of ours, if it's anyone who's interested in us. Let's hike and see how it goes."

They strolled idly past the museum, crossed the street, and walked up Kasr El Nil past the Modern Art Museum and the Automobile Club. Scotty took a pair of sunglasses from his pocket. They were of the silvered one-way mirror type that cuts down light transmission much as a neutral-density filter does for a camera.

Rick watched as he put them on, took them off again, and polished them with a handkerchief, turning them from side to side as he watched for spots.

"I knew those things looked like headlights," Rick gibed. "I didn't know they could also serve as rear-view mirrors."

"I may write an article on this for the Journal of the Optical Society," Scotty said. "Works fine. Our buddy is a Sudanese, from the looks of him. Also, he has a comrade. A big, sloppy type in a black coat and a tarboosh. I'd hate to tangle with either of them."

Rick thought of Scotty's comment that it wouldn't take much of a detective to realize he had the cat on him.

Scotty added, "Some distance behind are two other types, in tarbooshes. They're striding along at the same pace we are, and keeping their distance. I'm flattered. Looks as if 'they' figured it would take four to handle us."

"Maybe they sent one for us and three for the cat," Rick said hopefully. "Cats are good scrappers. Any bright ideas, ol' chum?"

"Yep. Let's go to the museum. They can't touch us in a public place. Got the map?"

They consulted it, letting the trailers see what was going on. The street they were on formed one side of a triangle, with its apex at the square in front of the museum. The next left turn, and another left a block farther on, would bring them to the front of the museum through Gami Sharkas and Shampelion streets.

Rick wondered if the latter was the Arab-English equivalent of the name of the man who had translated the hieroglyphics on the famous Rosetta stone and is considered the father of Egyptology. He knew

from his study of cryptography that the first man to read the strange Egyptian written language was Jean François Champollion. Or maybe the map maker had made a mistake by misspelling the name. He looked for a street sign in English when they reached the street, but he saw none.

He had to grin to himself at the strange turns his mind sometimes took. He should be concentrating on a plan of escape, not wondering about a strange spelling of a Frenchman's name. "See anything?" he asked Scotty.

"They're still with us. All four."

"Probably the second pair is in case the first pair loses us," Rick guessed. "Let's keep out of deserted alleys. They must be just waiting for an opportunity to grab us."

"I hear you talking," Scotty agreed. "And I believe every Brantish word of it."

They turned into the museum grounds, waving off guides who came running. Normally, they might have hired a museum guide, but they were suspicious now of all strangers.

Rick produced some piastres and paid their entrance fee. He noticed a sign at the window that said all parcels must be checked. He was glad kitty was hidden in his pocket.

Inside, they paused at the sudden spectacle of great stone figures and huge stone sarcophagi. There was a great hall filled with giant statuary straight ahead, and on each side, wide staircases led to the upper floor.

"Topside," Scotty said. "Then we can look down and see if any familiar faces come through the door."

They walked up the left-hand staircase, past rows of ancient wooden mummy cases, and came to the upper landing. A few minutes were spent inspecting the last resting place of a one-time Egyptian lord, with frequent glances toward the entrance.

"They don't need to follow us in," Rick pointed out finally. "Sooner or later we'll have to go out, and they'll be waiting."

"Sure. But it's wise to be careful. If one had followed us in here, we'd have been forced to keep an eye on him. Me, I want to see this museum."

They wandered through the countless rooms of the upper floor, each filled with antique treasures that were impossible to identify. There were few cards of explanation. One room was crowded with alabaster carvings, any one of which would have rated a whole room to itself in a modern American museum. The great building was literally jammed with rare objects, many of them thousands of years old. Uniformed guards were posted at every corner, obviously to protect the myriad treasures.

"The police are keeping an eye on us," Rick muttered.

"What else are they here for?" Scotty commented. "Don't try to carry off one of those ten-ton statues and they won't bother you."

Rick paused before a collection of brightly painted miniature clay soldiers, created to serve as a phantom army for some forgotten nobleman. "This stuff

is priceless. I'll bet they really do need guards."

As the boys walked into a small room containing shelves of assorted clay and stone dishes and utensils, Scotty exclaimed, "Look, on the third shelf!"

Rick searched until he saw what Scotty's quick eyes had spotted. It was partly hidden behind a clay jug. An Egyptian cat!

Closer inspection showed that it was not the mate to the one he carried. The museum cat was darker, obviously older. It was more stylized and slightly larger. There was no identifying card.

The Egyptian cat returned his gaze with dark stone eyes. "Wonder if they'd like to have you, too?" Rick said to himself. Four men wanted the one in his pocket. He wished it was as safe as the antique before him. Suddenly he let out a pleased chuckle. He had the solution.

"Are you lonely, little cat?" he asked. "Would you like company?"

Scotty got it instantly. He patted Rick on the shoulder. "That's the old Brant brain, boy. I'll duck out and distract the guard."

Rick moved on, inspecting jugs until he saw Scotty engage the guard in conversation. His pal gradually turned as he talked, until the guard's back was toward Rick. It was the work of only a moment to slip the cat from his pocket and push it out of sight behind the jug that partially screened the museum cat.

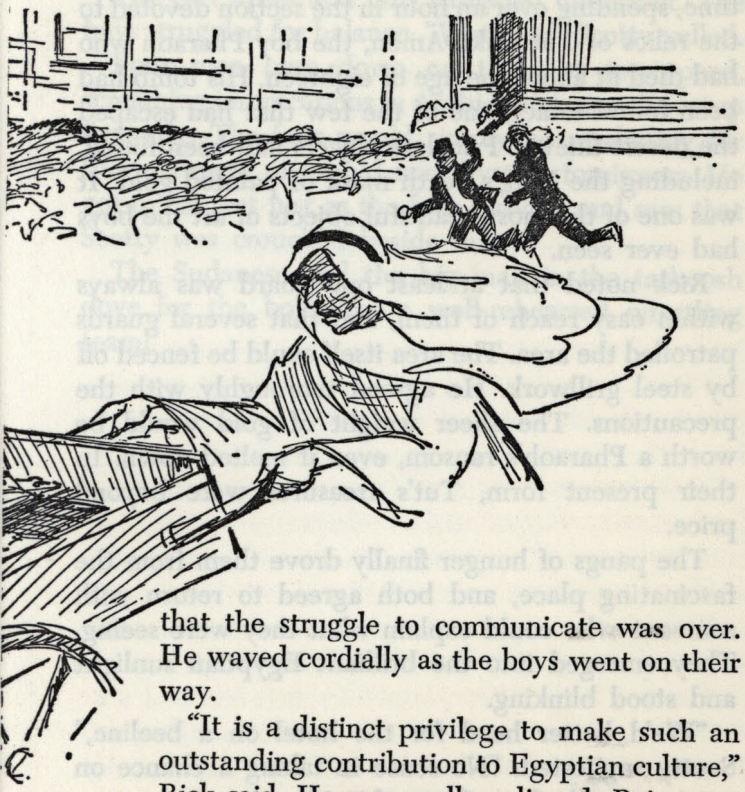
He smiled to himself. From the looks of the museum, it was highly unlikely that the cat ever would be noticed, even if it stood there forever. If one of

the Egyptologists ever did happen to see it, there would be a new puzzle to solve. Which dynasty invented plastics?

He walked to where Scotty was busy with the guard. The officer's understanding of English was

about zero, and Scotty's knowledge of Arabic was slightly less, so they were getting nowhere.

When he saw Rick, Scotty stopped trying. He grinned and put out his hand. The guard grinned back and clasped Scotty's hand, with obvious relief



that the struggle to communicate was over. He waved cordially as the boys went on their way.

"It is a distinct privilege to make such an outstanding contribution to Egyptian culture," Rick said. He was really relieved. Being unfamiliar with Cairo, they were apt to walk into an unexpected situation that might have re-

sulted in loss of the cat. There would be no reason for anyone to suspect the cat's hiding place now, because no one except Scotty knew that he had carried it out of the hotel.

There was much to see, and the boys took their time, spending over an hour in the section devoted to the relics of Tut-Ankh-Amon, the boy Pharaoh who had died at about the age of eighteen. His tomb had been found intact, one of the few that had escaped the desert thieves. Priceless objects had been found, including the King's death mask of painted gold. It was one of the most beautiful objects of art the boys had ever seen.

Rick noted that at least one guard was always within easy reach of them, and that several guards patrolled the area. The area itself could be fenced off by steel grillwork. He agreed thoroughly with the precautions. The sheer weight of gold would be worth a Pharaoh's ransom, even if melted down. In their present form, Tut's treasures were beyond price.

The pangs of hunger finally drove them from the fascinating place, and both agreed to return with someone who could explain what they were seeing. They emerged into the brilliant Egyptian sunlight and stood blinking.

"We'd better head for the hotel on a beeline," Scotty suggested. "No sense in taking a chance on getting roughed up for nothing."

"That's sense, ol' buddy. Let's go."

They walked down the steps and out a path to

the street. An old man with a pushcart was on the path, his cart laden with nuts of some kind. Rick stepped behind Scotty to give the vendor room, but the old man turned his cart suddenly and pushed it into them!

The cart upset and nuts cascaded underfoot. The boys struggled for balance. "Watch it!" Scotty yelled.

Four men bore down on them at top speed, screaming imprecations in Arabic. Rick saw the setup instantly. The four would simply be retaliating for the treatment of an old man by two foreigners. He got to his feet just as the four arrived, and saw that Scotty was crouched beside him.

The Sudanese and the big man in the tarboosh dove for the boys like a well-rehearsed wrestling team!

CHAPTER VIII

# The Midnight Call

Rick and Scotty left the ground simultaneously in a dive for the legs charging toward them. They connected, and the impact sent the attackers to the ground. Rick recovered from the dive and tensed for a swing, but he never made it. Arms locked around his chest, pinioning his own arms to his side. He struggled violently, but the grip never yielded.

From the corner of his eye he saw Scotty get in one driving punch that sent the Sudanese down to one knee, then Scotty was pinioned from behind, too.

The big man and the Sudanese swung into action fast. Hands slapped Rick's clothes in a fast but thorough search. Next to him Scotty was getting the same treatment.

The big man spoke sharply in Arabic and both boys were suddenly hurled sideways, landing together in a heap. They jumped to their feet and saw only four retreating backs. Even the peddler had scuttled away, leaving the spilled nuts on the ground. It was senseless to pursue the men. The boys looked at each other grimly, then suddenly Scotty smiled.

"I don't know who they are," he stated, "but I'll tell you this. They're real professionals. I haven't been taken like that in a long, long time."

Rick had to agree. The two-team operation had been swift and efficient. Neither boy had been hurt, or even roughed up particularly. That wasn't the purpose. "So they won't get us in a public place, huh? Well, if they'd wanted to do damage, they could have." He added, "And we couldn't have done a thing. But all they wanted was the cat."

Scotty nodded agreement. He brushed dust off his trousers. "Might as well go back to the hotel. I'm hungry. Anyway, they know now that you don't have the cat on you—and that I don't, either. So what will they think?"

"Either that it's at the hotel or the project, or that we've put it somewhere for safekeeping. They searched the hotel room. Suppose they'll try the project?"

"It's possible, I suppose. Anyway, if they want us they can get us. Notice that no one saw the ruckus? The timing was perfect. A few feet sooner and we'd have been within sight of the museum's ticket office. A few feet later and we'd have been on the street. As it was, shrubs shielded them. Pretty good operating, I'd say."

Rick thought so, too, and it worried him. "I have an unhappy idea buzzing around. If I were the big boss, and really determined to get the cat, I'd pick us up and make us talk."

"The language is a little mixed, but the thought is

clear as air. We'd better keep our guard up at all times."

"Meanwhile, what do we know about anything? Nothing. If only we knew why the cat is valuable!"

"If it wasn't before, it is now," Scotty replied. "It's a genuine museum piece. But if the cat is gone, we have three lovely kittens."

Rick chuckled. "What's the problem everyone has with kittens? It's finding a home for them. I wish we'd had one of the kittens a few minutes ago. There would have been one less homeless orphan."

"The kittens' turns will come. And it's our turn to eat. My stomach is quivering in Morse code. 'Send food. Send food.'"

Rick pointed to the hotel, just ahead. "Okay, chow hound. Lunch ahead. And lay off that hot-pepper stuff or that stomach of yours will be sending distress signals."

"I hear you talking," Scotty said feelingly. One dish, served at dinner the previous night, had required enough water to put out a three-alarm fire before the burning sensation stopped.

Hassan was waiting after lunch. He drove the boys to the project, where they looked into the control room long enough to let the scientists know they had arrived, then went at once to look at the kittens. Three identical statues, almost perfect replicas of the original, were sitting in the sunshine.

"Except for being a little rougher, they're our own dear little mysterious pet," Rick said. "Are they dry yet?"

Hassan passed the question on in Arabic to the workmen who had helped make the kittens. He reported, "They okay. You can take now."

"Ask him if we can give him a present for helping us," Scotty requested.

Hassan did so, then shook his head. He grinned, his teeth white in his pleasant black face. "He say making statues fun, not work. He help you yesterday, so he not have to fix plaster. All even."

The boys laughed at the explanation and shook hands with the workman.

"Now," Scotty asked, "what do we do with the children?"

"One goes in my pocket," Rick replied. "I feel lost without a friendly little feline weighing down one side of my coat. We can leave the others here in a safe place, maybe inside one of the control cabinets."

"Good idea. Going to tell Winston and the others about this morning?"

"Sure. Only I don't think we'll mention where the mama cat is hiding out. No use bogging them down with useless information. We'll tell Winston."

Scotty quirked an eyebrow. "Not suspicious of the others?"

Rick wasn't, and said so flatly. "Only the more people who know something, the more others are apt to find it out."

The scientists, however, were not even remotely interested. Their whole attention was given to the problem of getting the big radio telescope working.

Hakim Farid joined the boys long enough to say,

"We've about decided the strange signals are not originating within the system. Now we're looking at the possibility that some local source is giving us interference. We thought we'd eliminated all outside noise, but perhaps something new came up after we finished checking."

Rick pointed to Cairo, visible through the control-room window. "There must be lots of stuff down there that puts out radio-frequency signals, even electric shavers and heating pads. How can you eliminate all of it?"

"We can't, in the sense of really cutting it out. But the antenna construction takes local interference into account. It's a tight beam design that should prevent overriding of the main signal by any random side effects. That's what Kerama and Winston are checking now. There's not a great deal for you to do until they're through. In a half hour we'll start to swing the antenna to see if we get an increase in the signal by a change in direction. Until then, why not take it easy?"

"We will." Rick took the opportunity to tell Farid of the incident at the museum that morning. He described briefly how they had been followed, then attacked on the museum path.

Farid frowned. "I'm sorry to hear it. Cairo is pretty law-abiding, compared to what it used to be. But we still have crime, just as you do in your big cities. You didn't lose your wallets or anything valuable?"

"Nothing. We think they were after the cat."

"They didn't get it?"

"No. I didn't have it on me."

"That was fortunate." Farid frowned. "But why would anyone want the cat?"

Rick did not have an answer for that, and said so. The scientist smiled. "A cat isn't exactly big game for thieves, is it? On the other hand, the museum itself was robbed several weeks ago in spite of the guards. Thieves got away with a necklace supposed to have belonged to Kefren, who built the middle pyramid over there."

"Was it valuable?" Scotty asked.

"More than valuable. It is irreplaceable. In terms of cash, however, the value is around a quarter of a million dollars."

Rick whistled. "No wonder the guards watched us this morning."

Dr. Kerama called, "Hakim, can you help with these tracings, please?"

Farid joined the other scientists, leaving the boys to their own devices. Rick hunted until he found a space under an amplifier that was big enough for the two extra kittens. The space was covered by an access door. The kittens would be safe there. It would be no real loss if they were stolen, anyway.

Later, the boys helped check circuits while the radio telescope swung through a variety of arcs, with Farid at the controls. The strange signal came while the telescope was pointing only in one direction.

Rick asked Winston, "Could it really be coming from a single source in outer space?"

Winston shrugged. "We've thought of that. If the source remained fixed, we'd accept it as the most logical explanation. But since Kerama and Farid first noticed the signal it has shifted its apparent location by many degrees. That's why we think it must have some local explanation."

Rick understood. The sources in space studied by the radio telescopes were fixed, in the same sense that the stars themselves were fixed. Of course everything in the galaxy—even in the universe—was in motion, but in spite of the enormous velocities, the change in location would not be particularly apparent in a short time, or even in a lifetime.

A short distance away was a wonderful example of this kind of motion. In the great pyramid of Khufu, Rick had read, a channel had been left so the light of the North Star could shine on the altar of Isis. The channel was still there. But in over three thousand years the slight, slow wobbling of the earth on its axis had caused a shift. What was then the North Star was now Thuban, in the constellation of Draco the Dragon. The present North Star, Polaris, which is not exactly at the celestial north pole, did not shine on the altar. Nor would the next star to become the northern marker—bright Vega. But if the pyramids were still standing after twenty-seven thousand years had passed, the cycle of movement would be complete, and Thuban would again shine through the channel to the altar of a forgotten Egyptian goddess.

It gave Rick a shiver to think about it. Even now,

the pyramids were old enough to have seen a change of north stars. They looked good for another three thousand years or more. It would take a lot of time to erode away that much massive stone.

Then he stopped thinking about it, because the telescope was in motion again, and there was work to be done.

It was late night before the scientists were satisfied. The boys rode back with Hassan, very thoughtful about the day's events. Now they had both the little statue and the even greater mystery of the space signals to think about.

Clearly, the strange signal was not of local origin. The scientists rejected the idea that it came from trouble in the circuit. But it was no natural heavenly object. What was it?

Tomorrow, Winston had said, they would decide on the next step. Right now all hands were too tired to think clearly. The boys agreed that the statement applied to them.

"Shall we eat?" Rick asked as they approached the hotel.

"Let's have a sandwich sent up," Scotty suggested. "I don't feel like waiting in a dining room, even if one is open this late."

"Good idea." Rick leaned forward and told Hassan, "Just drop us off, then go on home and get some rest."

"Not tired," Hassan said cheerfully. "You work, I rest."

They certainly were not working Hassan very

hard, Rick agreed. But he was pleasant to have around. They bade him good night in front of the hotel and went for their room key. The clerk handed Rick an envelope along with it. It was addressed to Mr. R. Brant, care of the hotel, and the return address was in Arabic.

Rick waited until they were in their room to open it. A quick glance showed that the room had not been searched, or if it had, with greater care than the last time. He ripped open the envelope and took out a sheet of paper, the letterhead printed in Arabic except for the name Fuad Moustafa.

"Fuad Moustafa," he said aloud. "Any relation to Ali, I wonder?"

"Read it," Scotty urged.

Rick did so. " 'Dear Sir: You have brought to Cairo, I believe, a plastic replica of a cat, which was given to you by Mr. Bartouki for delivery to my brother, Ali. I deeply regret the inconvenience caused by your failure to find my brother in his shop. Only today did I learn that his chief clerk, an officious person, had attempted to take delivery of the cat by pretending to be my brother. The clerk shall be discharged for this offensive behavior.

" 'Since my brother is absent from the city, on business to Beirut, which was the reason for his absence from the shop, I shall be delighted to serve in his stead. If you will call me, I shall come at your convenience. Or, if you will do me the honor of breaking bread at my home, I shall be at your service. Since my home is also my office, any time that is conven-

ient for you will be my pleasure. Sincerely, Fuad Moustafa.' "

Rick jumped for the phone and called the desk, "See if Hassan is still around, please. Tell him to wait, if he is."

The clerk asked him to wait and Rick put his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to Scotty. "The first sensible suggestion we've had. Let's go call on Fuad Moustafa. If there are lights, we'll pay him a visit. If not, we'll come back. I'm anxious to get this settled."

"So am I," Scotty agreed, then added, "Only let's be sure this isn't a trap."

The clerk came back on the line. "Hassan is here. He will wait."

"Thank you. Now, can you tell me anything about a Mr. Fuad Moustafa? Do you know him?"

"Indeed, sir. He is a lawyer, from a well-known family. He has two brothers who are also well known. One is Ali, who has a shop in El Mouski, and the other is Kemel, who is a textile importer."

Rick thanked him and hung up. "It's our boy," he said. He repeated what the clerk had told him.

"Sounds like pay dirt," Scotty agreed. "Only we'll still be careful. Let's go."

Rick echoed him. "Let's go! If this is on the level, we can get the cat in the morning and deliver it." At last, the secret of the Egyptian cat might be unraveled!

CHAPTER IX

# The Uninvited Visitor

As THE boys hurried through the lobby the night clerk came to meet them.

"I noticed that the name of Mr. Moustafa was on the message I gave you. If you intend to visit him, you will have no trouble. His house is also his office, and it is very well known. Just tell Hassan to take you to Abd El Aziz Street."

The boys thanked him, somewhat relieved that Fuad Moustafa apparently was so well known. Outside, Hassan was waiting. "Not so tired?" he greeted them.

"Not too tired for a short trip," Rick said. "Can you take us to Abd El Aziz Street?"

"Not far. Near El Mouski."

As Hassan drove off, at the usual high velocity, Rick asked, "Do you know Fuad Moustafa?"

"Hear name," Hassan said. "But not know. What number street he live?"

Rick took the letter from his pocket, switched on the dome light, and scanned it. There was no address

given in English. He started to hand the letter to Hassan, then remembered the dragoman could not read. He puzzled over the Arabic in the letterhead, realizing the address must be given there. If he could identify the numbers . . . there, he recognized one. Both boys had spent some time studying the telephone dial at the project, on which the numbers were in Arabic. It was easy to identify them, and Rick had spotted the five, a figure like a tiny heart, upside down.

"I think I have it," he said. "Let's see. Arabic reads from right to left, instead of the way we write. That makes this number . . . hmmmm . . . a heart, a dot, and two sevens backward with one squiggle in the upper line. The heart is a five, the dot a zero, and backward sevens with one squiggle are twos. So the number is 5022. Right?"

"That's the way I remember it," Scotty said. "So that's the number. *Enshallah.*"

Hassan started laughing in the front seat. "Now you speak Arabic? You must say *a'eraf shwayet 'arabi.*"

"What does that mean?" Scotty demanded.

"It mean 'I know some Arabic.'"

The boys laughed with him. In a few moments Hassan swung the little car to the curb and pointed to the nearest building. "There 5022."

Rick started to get out, then he asked curiously, "How do you know, Hassan? I thought you couldn't read."

"No can read words. Read numbers plenty good.

Could not take people to places if could not read numbers."

That made sense, Rick thought.

Scotty let out a sudden exclamation. "Hey, this is a barbershop, and it's closed for the night."

Rick looked, then switched on the dome light. He compared the letterhead number and the number on the door. Clearly, it was 5022, unless they had mistaken threes for twos. The only difference between the two numbers was an extra squiggle in the upper line of the three. He checked the letter again. No, they were twos. He said so. "This is the number on the letter."

"You let me see, please?" Hassan asked.

"Sure, Hassan."

The dragoman took the letter and examined it. He chuckled. "*Samehni, ya sidi.* That mean excuse, sir. Small mistake. You reading backward. Number is 2205."

"But how can that be?" Rick asked. "Arabic goes backward from English."

"Maybe so with words," Hassan said. "But numbers not so. This number is 2205. You want to go?"

Rick sighed. "I learn something new every day. Okay, Hassan. You're the dragoman."

The little car swung around and sped back the way they had come, into a better part of the city. In a short time Hassan slowed and began searching. At last he pulled to the curb, in front of a large house of Victorian design. "Here is 2205," he announced.

The boys got out and saw immediately that the

house was in darkness. Not a light shone anywhere.

"No one home," Rick said, disappointed.

Scotty surveyed the dark structure. "Funny. A house this size must have servants. There should be a light somewhere. Maybe around back?"

"I doubt it, but we can take a look."

Hassan's voice stopped them. "Something wrong, I think."

"What do you mean?" Rick asked quickly.

Hassan gestured to where a small group of people had gathered on the other side of the street. "Why they stop? Not so strange for car come to house like this."

That was true, Rick thought. The people stood quietly, watching, and in a moment two others joined them. Their attitude was not simple curiosity.

"Can you ask them what's up?" Scotty asked.

"Will try." Hassan took a step toward the group and called cheerfully in Arabic. No one answered. He walked toward them, still talking cheerfully, and the little group melted instantly into ordinary people walking the street on their various errands by ones and twos.

Rick needed no interpreter for their actions. Rather than answer a courteous, cheerful question from Hassan they had hurried off, as though afraid of something. But what?

"Pretty strange, I think," Hassan said. "I just ask who can tell me where to find Fuad Moustafa, and they go."

Scotty had been staring at the house. He walked

to the steps and stared into the darkness, then went up them onto the porch. In a moment he came down again.

"Something's very wrong," he said. "I thought I saw the gleam of metal, and I did. A brand-new padlock on the door! New hasp, too, put on in a way no house owner would ever do it. It's as though someone was closing a barn door and didn't care how it looked."

A chill went down Rick's spine. Instead of a solution, they had found a deeper mystery. He was sure of only one thing for the present. They should not wait at the house of Fuad Moustafa.

"Come on," he said. "Back to the hotel. If we can't have facts to feed on, we can at least have that sandwich."

But the sandwich was not to be had so easily. Back in their room, a call to the waiter brought the porter, who announced that all hotel facilities were closed and the waiters had gone home. He would be glad to go to a restaurant he knew of and get them sandwiches, but it would take a little time.

The boys ordered, then got undressed. Scotty went in to wash up while Rick wrote cards to the folks at home. A knock interrupted him. "Must be the porter," he called to Scotty, and went to open the door.

A stranger stood there, a big man in an immaculate gray linen suit. He wore thick eyeglasses with stainless-steel rims. On his curly hair was a tarboosh of red velvet. In his hand was a gleaming, snub-nosed hammerless revolver, pointed at Rick's midriff.

*A snub-nosed revolver was pointed at Rick's midriff*

"I know it's late," the man said pleasantly, "but may I come in?"

He walked through the door, and Rick backed away to make room.

"Are you Fuad Moustafa?" he asked shakily.

The man smiled. "I have not that honor. You have never seen a Moustafa, or you would not ask. They are famous for the biggest noses and mustaches in the Republic. I could have lied, but it is my pride that I never lie. My identity is not important."

"What do you want?" Rick asked. He kept backing away, because he wanted desperately for the man to follow. That would give Scotty a chance to move in from behind.

"I think you know what I want. A small and unimportant piece of plastic, in the shape of a cat."

"Why is the cat so important?" Rick asked.

"It is not important. You may believe this. However, for reasons I shall not disclose, it has certain elements of value to a few people."

"Sentimental value?" Rick asked. He was stalling.

"It depends on what one is sentimental about. I have no sentimental attachment to this object. I merely want it. Now, my time is short. I was fortunate to find the porter gone, but he will doubtless return. The cat, my young friend, and quickly!"

Scotty moved from the bathroom on silent, bare feet, and even as his pal moved, Rick saw the object in his hand. It was a nail file.

Scotty stepped close and his hand moved. The stranger stiffened.

"That's a knife in your back," Scotty said. "Drop the gun."

The revolver muzzle never faltered. "An interesting stalemate," the man said calmly. "You can thrust, but no matter how fast you are, I can shoot. So, if I die, so does your friend. Now, since you created this situation, how are you going to get out of it? Or did I create it, through my careless eagerness? I was so pleased to find the hall empty that I forgot there were two of you."

"No matter," Scotty informed him. "We can stand like this until help comes."

"Then you expect someone. Make no mistake, I will not be taken. If necessary, I will end the stalemate with a shot and take my chances with the knife. It is even possible I will get both of you."

Rick was watching the man's face closely. He was not bluffing. There was no sign of sweat or nervousness. He knew the situation exactly, and was prepared to deal with it. The boy reached a decision.

"Drop it, Scotty," he commanded. "Pull back and come around so he can see you. I'm going to give him the cat."

"Don't!" Scotty exclaimed. "Don't, Rick!"

"I'm going to give him the cat," Rick repeated. "It isn't worth bloodshed. Now co-operate, will you?"

Scotty drew back and walked around so the stranger could see him. With a gesture of disgust he threw the nail file on one of the twin beds.

The stranger smiled his appreciation. "A very good try. It would have worked, no doubt, on a less experi-

enced man. Now, Mr. Brant, where is the cat?"

"In my pocket, in the wardrobe."

The gun muzzle waved Scotty to the window at the far end of the room. "Out of reach, if you please. I will cover Mr. Brant just to be sure it is not a weapon that he has in his pocket."

Scotty obeyed, scowling. Rick led the way to the wardrobe. Moving slowly and carefully, he got the concrete kitten and held it up.

"Excellent. I see the hotel has provided you with a newspaper. Please use it to wrap the cat."

Rick did so, and handed it over.

"Thank you. I appreciate your co-operation, since I am a man who detests unnecessary violence. You have acted wisely." He backed to the door, opened it, and closed it behind him.

Rick's eyes met Scotty's across the room, and both grinned widely, but they said nothing in case the stranger had lingered outside the door. Not until a few moments had passed and Rick had checked the hallway did he speak.

"Well," he said happily, "one orphan kitten has found a happy home!"

CHAPTER X

# The Great Pyramid

PARNELL WINSTON faced the group of Egyptian scientists in the crowded radio-telescope control room. Rick and Scotty waited impatiently for the scientist to begin. They knew something important was coming up, from remarks dropped by Winston earlier, but they didn't know what.

"Gentlemen," Winston began, "I and my young associates came at Dr. Kerama's request because of the assumption that internal or local difficulties had caused the strange peaks in your Sanborn tracings of the first tryouts of the new system. The assumption was a natural and logical one. However, we have demonstrated that it isn't true. The system is working so perfectly that I must congratulate you. It is seldom that anything so complex functions as well in the early stages."

Winston paused thoughtfully. "Of course Dr. Kerama realized that it would be highly unusual to have internal circuit trouble cause such signals. But what we have left, after eliminating the possibilities

of both internal and local interference, is something even more unusual. In fact, it is fantastic."

Rick moved forward a little. He didn't want to miss any of this, because he knew Winston, and he had never before seen the scientist so excited.

"What we have is a source of neutral hydrogen out in space, over five thousand light years away from earth. This source is moving at such incredible velocity that it is very close to the speed of light."

There was a stunned silence in the room. Rick considered the implications of Winston's statement. The scientist had spent hours with Kerama and Farid going over the Sanborn tracings, checking the location of the source as shown by the big telescope's position. The change in the source's position, from the time of first discovery to yesterday's checking of the system, had given enough data to calculate its velocity with reasonable accuracy.

The big unknown was the precise distance of the source. Readings from a single position could not give distance with high accuracy, so the scientists weren't sure of their figures—yet.

Winston asked, "Dr. Kerama, do you want to explain what we have decided?"

The Egyptian scientist nodded. "Thank you, Dr. Winston. And thank you on behalf of all of us for determining that our mystery does not come from the receiver system itself, or from nearby."

Kerama faced the group. "Last night I sent cables, giving detailed information on times, locations, and our computations to the radio-telescope stations at

Manchester, England, and Green Bank and Goldstone in the United States. I also, at Dr. Winston's suggestion, sent similar information to the Mount Palomar Observatory.

"If the other radio telescopes are able to participate, it will serve to confirm or disprove our own information. If confirmed, we will then have a precise fix on the source that has caused us so much concern. We will also have the benefit of continuous consultation with our American and English colleagues. At the same time, the two-hundred-inch telescope at Palomar will attempt to see this strange object and to photograph it."

Rick knew of the huge American radio telescope at Green Bank, West Virginia, and the smaller one at Goldstone Lake, in California. Both had tracked space probes to incredible distances. The Manchester telescope, more generally known as Jodrell Bank, had also tracked probes. With a team like that working along with Sahara Wells, results ought to be coming fast.

Dr. Kerama continued. "We have been so concerned with what we thought was a problem that we have not accumulated all possible data on this hydrogen source. We will start at once to do this. The first step, of course, is to determine how long it is within view of our antenna, so that we may set up a schedule. The next is to obtain as much material as we can on the 21-centimeter wave length. After that we will shift to other wave lengths to see if the source is emitting. Dr. Farid will make assignments."

Farid stood up. "A radio-teletype circuit will be installed at once. Work is already in progress in the city, and we should have installation crews here within an hour or two. That will enable us to keep in touch with the other stations. For now, I would like Dr. Mandarawi and Dr. Azrar to establish the time when the source will be within our horizon, and set up the necessary data for the operator in charge of each shift. The rest of us will check out the circuit and establish calibration to be ready for recording this afternoon."

The scientist gestured to Rick and Scotty. "We know that the source will not come up over our horizon until about one o'clock. When it does, we would appreciate your help in making audio recordings. Until then, you're on your own."

"What'll we do?" Scotty asked.

Rick looked at his watch. It was shortly after nine. "Why not go over to see the pyramids? Then we can have lunch at the Mena House and come back in time to go to work."

"Good idea. Better tell Winston, though, in case something comes up."

Rick did so, and the boys went outside to where Hassan waited patiently. They told him their plans and got into the little car for the short drive to Giza.

"I got some of that, but not all," Scotty said. "Give me a brief rundown."

"Okay. I'm no expert, but I think I got the drift. To start with, the most common thing in space is hydrogen gas. It gives off energy that can be de-

tected on the 21-centimeter wave length. This is important to the radio astronomers, because they can use their telescopes to figure out how hydrogen is distributed throughout the universe."

"I'm with you," Scotty said. "Now our boys have proved that the funny signals in the hydrogen impulse they've been getting originate in space, and hydrogen shouldn't act like that."

"That's it. Also, a hydrogen source in space ought to stay fixed. But this one is shooting off at high velocity. That would be strange enough, but it's also giving off signals that don't seem natural."

"So the scientists yell for help from their colleagues in America and England, and perhaps someone can figure out what's causing this strange behavior?"

"On the button, ol' buddy."

Scotty grinned. "It will probably turn out to be an Egyptian space cat mewing for milk from the Milky Way."

Rick patted the kitten in his pocket. He had replaced the one turned over to the intruder the night before. Now, as he told Scotty, only two orphan kittens needed homes. But placing the kittens didn't answer the questions that puzzled him. Why was the Egyptian cat important? And who were the people that wanted it?

There were things about the mystery that didn't add up. For instance, Fuad Moustafa had written a polite letter claiming the cat, but strictly unpolite and violent efforts had been made to get it. And where were the brothers Moustafa?

Hassan drew to a stop before the great pyramid of Khufu. "We here. Want to go in?"

"In a while," Rick answered. "We'll take a look around outside, first."

The boys got out of the car and gazed upward at the incredible pile of masonry. The blocks were huge, weathered by centuries of wind and sand. Once the whole pyramid had been covered with a smooth facing of stone, but much of it had been destroyed by thieves trying to find the entrance to the Pharaoh's tomb.

Rick saw that the top of the lowermost course of blocks was covered with chips of the weathered stone. He picked up a couple and put them in his pocket. His rock collection at home could use a genuine piece of pyramid, and his sister Barby would like one for a paperweight.

"This could be climbed," Scotty said, gazing upward.

"Oh, yes," Hassan affirmed. "Some guides go up to top all the time. Can show you best way. You want to go?"

"Not now," Scotty said. "Let's look around first. But I'm going to climb this before we leave."

"And I'll be with you," Rick said.

They reached the corner of the pyramid and Rick sighted along the edge.

The thing that impressed him most was the size of the individual blocks. Photographs were usually taken at sufficient distance to show the entire pyramid. At that distance they looked pretty smooth.

Close up, it was a tremendous jigsaw puzzle of blocks that weighed tons.

Rick had expected a considerable number of tourists and guides, but apparently it was too early. Down by the Sphinx he saw a few Arabs, but no foreigners were in sight. He was glad they could see at least a part of Giza before the crowd arrived. "Take us inside, Hassan," he requested.

"Can do. You follow."

Hassan led the way to the center of the side. High above their heads, he pointed to a hole. "Up there."

The three climbed through tumbled blocks to the opening and paused to look around. This was not the opening the Pharaoh had intended. It had been made by thieves, centuries ago. By boring downward at an angle, they had intercepted the inner passageways that led to the buried king and his treasure.

Electric lights were strung along the corridor at intervals, but the passage was far from bright. Hassan led the way, with Rick following and Scotty bringing up the rear.

Scotty's voice reverberated in the stone passageway. "I've been thinking that you ought to be just about overcome with happiness. Two mysteries on your hands, one detective type and one scientific type, and now you're walking into the middle of a few million tons of rock. How full can life get?"

Rick grinned. "And you're not happy at all. Just came along for the ride, I suppose?"

"Oh, I'm happy. But I'm a simple soul. One mystery at a time and plenty of chow is all I need."

They left the tunnel cut by the thieves and found themselves in a broad concourse with high ceiling and walls that still held the remnants of ancient decorations. Rick's vivid imagination could picture the scene as it must once have been, with torches lighting the route as the mighty Khufu was carried by richly clad slaves along this route to the inner crypt.

Hassan pointed to where a side passage led upward. "Room there. Queen buried, but nothing now. All gone. Thieves take."

This was the story of Egypt. Few tombs had been found intact. That was why finding Tut-Ankh-Amon had been of such importance. Most of the burial places of the Pharaohs had been found and looted many centuries ago. One such tomb would make a band of thieves and their descendants rich. But while the thieves had grown fat, history had suffered. Each rifled tomb meant quantities of historical materials lost forever.

Scotty held up a hand. "Someone coming."

"More tourist, maybe," Hassan offered.

Rick looked around. In the echoing chamber it was hard to tell the direction from which the footsteps were coming, and whether it was one person or many. Hassan was probably right, he thought. It was late enough in the day for tourists to be arriving.

And on the heels of the thought, Arabs erupted from the entrance through which they had come!

There was less than a second of doubt. The men were after them! Rick saw Scotty crouch as an Arab

charged, saw the Arab go headlong through the air as Scotty caught him in a judo throw. Then Rick and Hassan were fighting for their lives!

An Arab rushed at Rick, arms widespread, and the boy stepped between the arms and threw a short punch that caught the attacker squarely on the nose. Blood spurted and he let out an anguished yell, then Rick put a foot in his stomach and heaved. The man flew backward, arms flailing, and landed on top of one who was grappling with Hassan. The guide took advantage of the break to grasp his second assailant around the middle and dump him. The guide kicked expertly and the Arab lay still.

Scotty was backing away from two of them when Rick charged to the rescue. He hit one from behind, his shoulder taking the man at the knees. The Arab slammed forward. Scotty jumped in and grabbed his second attacker by the burnoose, then fell backward with him and flipped. The Arab flew through the air like an ungainly bird and slammed into the farther wall.

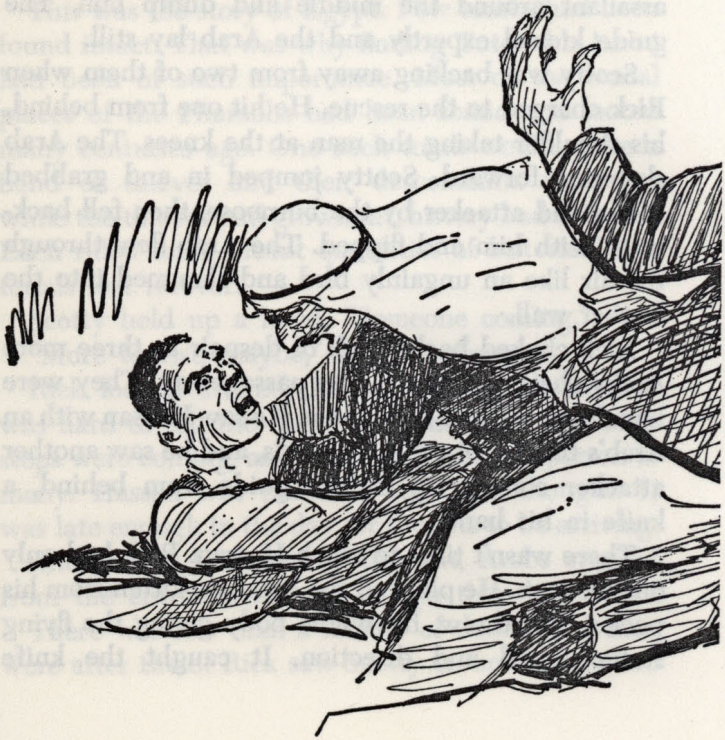
Rick choked back a yell of despair as three more Arabs charged through the passageway. They were hopelessly outnumbered now. He saw Hassan with an Arab's throat between his hands, and he saw another attacker coming up on the guide from behind, a knife in his hand.

There wasn't time to reach Hassan. Rick had only one weapon. He plucked the concrete kitten from his pocket and threw, his whole body giving the flying statue speed and direction. It caught the knife

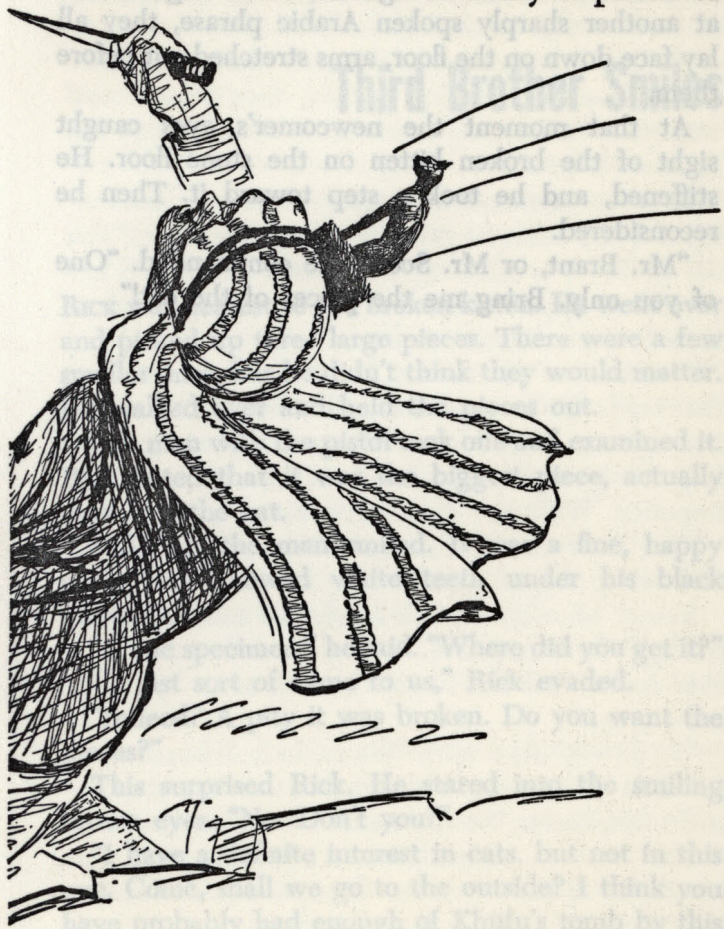
wielder where his headdress met his ear. He dropped as though hit with an ax. The kitten fell to the stone floor and shattered.

Three Arabs hit Scotty at the same time. Rick dove headlong into the fray and got his hands around a stubble-covered face. He put a knee in the man's back and wrenched, but the Arab turned like a cat and reached for his throat.

A voice yelled in Arabic. Miraculously, the Arabs fell back. As Rick and Scotty got to their feet they saw the burnoosed figures raise hands high.



At the passage entrance was a man in Western dress, an Egyptian with a bristling mustache and a tremendous nose. He was obviously a person of

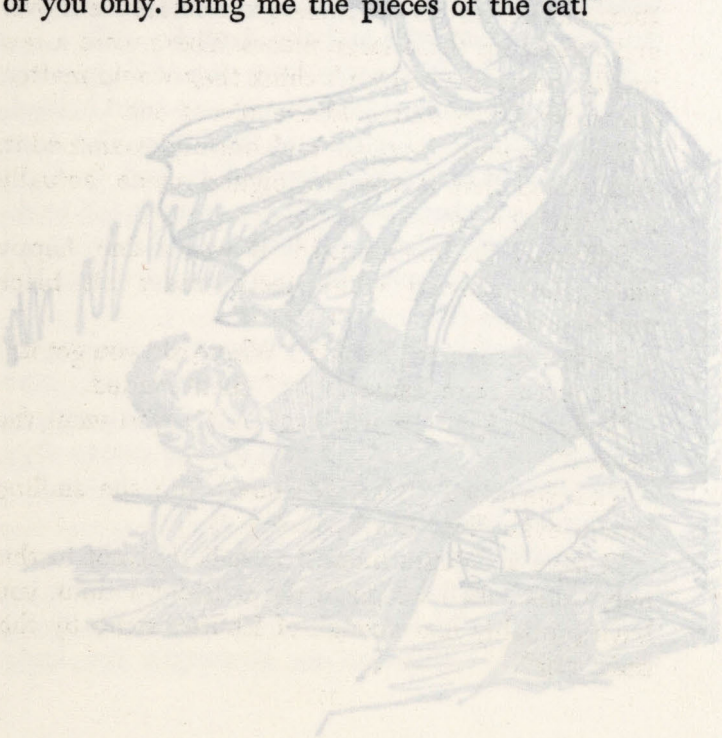


authority, and the authority was made plain by the Luger automatic pistol he held in his hand.

The Arabs crowded together, hands high. Then, at another sharply spoken Arabic phrase, they all lay face down on the floor, arms stretched out before them.

At that moment the newcomer's eyes caught sight of the broken kitten on the stone floor. He stiffened, and he took a step toward it. Then he reconsidered.

"Mr. Brant, or Mr. Scott," he commanded. "One of you only. Bring me the pieces of the cat!"



CHAPTER XI

# Third Brother Smiles

Rick was nearest to the broken kitten. He went over and picked up three large pieces. There were a few smaller ones, but he didn't think they would matter. He walked over and held the pieces out.

The man with the pistol took one and examined it. Rick noted that it was the biggest piece, actually over half the cat.

Suddenly the man smiled. It was a fine, happy smile that showed white teeth under his black mustache.

"A fine specimen," he said. "Where did you get it?"

"It just sort of came to us," Rick evaded.

"Indeed? A pity it was broken. Do you want the pieces?"

This surprised Rick. He stared into the smiling brown eyes. "No. Don't you?"

"I have a definite interest in cats, but not in this one. Come, shall we go to the outside? I think you have probably had enough of Khufu's tomb by this time, eh?"

The pistol motioned to the outstretched Arabs. "This carrion will not bother us. I told them the first man to step outside the pyramid before an hour has elapsed would be shot."

To Rick's astonishment the man tucked the pistol into a capacious jacket pocket, then turned and walked toward the outer entrance. Rick, Scotty, and Hassan followed.

In a few moments they stood blinking in the sunlight. Their rescuer gave them a polite bow. "You are probably wondering who I am, and how I appeared so opportunely, eh? Allow me to introduce myself. I am Kemel Moustafa."

The brother of Ali and Fuad! Rick remembered the words of the hotel intruder who had taken the first kitten: The Moustafas were known for the largest mustaches and noses in the United Arab Republic. Well, the description fitted.

"I'm Rick Brant," he said. "This is Don Scott, and our guide, Hassan."

Kemel Moustafa shook hands all around. "I am thirsty," he announced. "We will exchange stories over coffee, eh? The Mena House is close by, and I have a car."

"So do we," Rick said. "We came in Hassan's car."

"Then let us drive down in our separate cars and meet there. We have much to talk over."

That was an understatement, Rick thought. He wondered as Hassan drove them to the hotel below the pyramids: had the business in the pyramid been staged so Kemel could come to the rescue? If not,

that meant two different groups were interested in the cat.

The way Kemel Moustafa had looked at the broken kitten was revealing, too. One glance and he had rejected it. How had he known? He put the question aloud to Scotty.

"Maybe it didn't break like plastic," Scotty guessed. "Or, it's possible the original is unbreakable."

Rick didn't think either of those answers could be the right one. "Could there be something inside the cat? Kemel would have seen right away that the broken one was solid."

"There's a hunk of lead in the cat, according to Bartouki. But suppose you're right, and it isn't lead? What could be valuable enough to cause all these wild goings-on?"

"Diamonds. Rubies. Maybe a radium needle in a lead shield. The possibilities are endless."

"Uhuh. Only one thing bothers me a little. Why use a plastic cat as a container to smuggle things into Egypt? There must be better ways."

"This way hasn't been very successful," Rick agreed. "Anyway, here's the hotel. Let's ask Kemel Moustafa."

Over coffee, Rick asked the third Moustafa brother many questions, and received answers to most of them—although the answers were not always satisfactory.

Moustafa anticipated some of the questions. As the waiter brought coffee, he pulled out his wallet and showed the boys his identity card, driver's li-

cense, and business card. Clearly, he was Kemel Moustafa.

"I have been to Khartoum on business," he said. "Last night I returned to the city and found that a family emergency had taken both of my brothers out of town. Fuad left very suddenly, after he had written to you. I apologize on his behalf. However, he must be excused, since a call from Ali, in Beirut, sent him running to the airport to catch the next flight. He simply had no time even to call you. His secretary tried to call you today, without success."

"We wondered," Rick said.

"Of course. And you are also wondering how I came into the pyramid at just the right time. A fortunate accident. You see, I came to Sahara Wells hoping to see you, but you were sightseeing. Dr. Winston was kind enough to tell me where you were. I simply went hunting for you. A quick drive around the area told me you must be in one of the pyramids, and the biggest one seemed the most logical place to look for you."

Rick believed him. Moustafa wouldn't tell a tale that a moment's talk with Winston would disprove.

"Who was the man who pretended to be your brother Ali?" Scotty asked.

"His chief clerk. He is an arrogant type who often shows poor judgment. Instead of simply explaining to you that Ali was out of town, he apparently told you he was Ali. This was the case?"

Rick confirmed it.

"He will be discharged at once. I suspected it

when I questioned him last night. He gave some lame excuse about your refusing to hand over the cat to anyone except my brother Ali. He told Fuad the same thing, according to his secretary."

"It wasn't such a lame excuse, Mr. Moustafa," Rick corrected. "Mr. Bartouki asked us to deliver the cat to Ali Moustafa. We have no instructions to deliver it to anyone else."

"I see. And I commend your discretion. But my brother Ali will not return for many weeks, and you will not want to take the cat back to America with you. So we will telephone Mohammed Bartouki, and you will hear directly from him that I am a suitable substitute for my brother."

Scotty asked bluntly, "Why is the cat so important?"

Moustafa spread his hands wide. "Why not? The creature will open a new industry in Cairo. It will employ a number of people. It will make a profit for the Moustafa-Bartouki enterprises. It will please the tourists. Obviously the cat is important."

Rick tossed in his loaded question. "How did you know the cat in the pyramid wasn't the cat we brought from America?"

Kemel Moustafa's thick eyebrows went up. "It was obvious, was it not? The broken cat was made of colored concrete. The cat Bartouki took such pains to develop was of a plastic that does not have the graininess of concrete. If you tell me the one in the pyramid was indeed the original, I will be very disappointed. Such a model would not be suitable."

"It wasn't," Rick said briefly.

"Ah. And where is the original?"

Rick's smile was every bit as warm and friendly as Kemel Moustafa's. "Perhaps the answer to that had better wait until we have talked to Bartouki."

The Egyptian's smile broadened. "Discretion in one so young," he proclaimed, "is a rare and precious thing." He put money on the table for their coffee and rose.

"You will excuse me? I have business in the city. But tonight at seven I will come to your hotel and we will phone our friend in New York. It will then be noon in New York, and we will find him reading the Koran at home. This is his custom. Until then, *Assalamo alaikum,* which is to say, 'Good day to you.' "

As the boys walked to where Hassan waited, Scotty grinned at Rick. " 'Discretion in one so young,' " he quoted, " 'is a rare and precious thing.' He should know you as I do. Discretion has nothing to do with it. You just don't want to part with that cat until you know everything there is to know about it."

Rick shrugged. "I haven't heard you volunteering to hand the poor creature over. Besides, our pal Kemel is not all that he seems."

"And how do you know?"

"Easy. Did he ask us who jumped us in the pyramid, or why? Did he explain why he carries a Luger? Nope, to both. He carries a Luger because there's danger in this business. And he knows why

those Arabs jumped us. He may not know them by name, but he knows what they were after, and he knows why."

"Which is more than we know," Scotty concluded.

"For now," Rick agreed. "But we'll find out before we're through, one way or another!"

CHAPTER XII

# Third Brother Stops Smiling

Rick opened the door to a knock at precisely two minutes of seven, and admitted Kemel Moustafa. The Egyptian shook hands politely. "It takes some time to get a call through," he said, "so I placed our call an hour ago. The operator assured me it would go through precisely at seven."

Moustafa turned to Scotty and shook hands again. "According to my watch, we have only a few seconds to wait. Mr. Brant, you will answer the phone, if you please. Identify Bartouki to your own satisfaction, then ask him about Kemel Moustafa. Then turn the phone over to me, and I will talk with him. After that you take the phone back again, and he will give you final instructions. This is acceptable?"

"Absolutely," Rick said. He thought quickly. How could he establish Bartouki's identity for certain? Then, as the phone rang, he knew.

Rick answered. "Rick Brant speaking."

"On your call to New York. Mr. Bartouki is on the line. Go ahead, please."

Rick raised his voice instinctively. After all, New York was a long distance away! Then he realized that electronic facilities reduce the need for shouting, and lowered it again. "Mr. Bartouki? This is Rick Brant."

"Good morning, Rick. Ah, but this is evening in Cairo, is it not?"

Rick was sure he identified the little merchant's voice, but he went ahead anyway. "Mr. Bartouki, please forgive me, but I must establish your identity beyond any doubt. Can you tell me what color dress my sister Barbara wore at your reception, and the color of her hair and eyes?"

"Of course. Her dress was a very attractive blue wool with a red leather belt. She is very blond, with dark-blue eyes, and she is about my height."

Rick was satisfied. "Thank you, sir. The reason I had to be careful is this. We went to Ali Moustafa's shop, and a man who did not answer your description of Ali Moustafa pretended to be him. We refused to give up the cat. Then our room was searched. We received a letter from Fuad Moustafa, and when we went to his house it was padlocked. Last night a man came to our room with a pistol and demanded the cat. We gave him a copy we had made in concrete. I should add we also were attacked in front of the Egyptian Museum by men who searched us. That was why we made the copies in concrete. The real one is hidden. Then, this morning, we were attacked again, inside the pyramid. We were rescued by Kemel Moustafa. He is here with us now. If you

approve, we will give him the cat. If not, tell us what to do with it."

Bartouki's voice sounded incredulous over the ocean miles. "This is incredible! I must know the meaning of this. May I speak to Kemel?"

Rick handed the phone to the third brother and listened. Kemel launched immediately into a rapid flow of Arabic.

Scotty interrupted, "Can you speak in English please?"

Kemel stopped abruptly. "Of course. Forgive me." He spoke into the phone. "Your young American friends want me to speak in English, Mohammed. They are cautious, and they have reason. I did not know of their room being searched, the man who came with a pistol, or the attack in front of the museum. I arrived this morning because I had gone to the radio telescope to look for them. . . . Yes . . . yes, most certainly I will try to find out who has caused them such trouble. Ali and Fuad are in Beirut. It is because of our father. You know that he has been very ill? Yes, by all means send a cable. It will be appreciated. And now, if you will tell Mr. Brant . . . yes . . . *ma'e salamet Ellah,* Mohammed. Allah protect you."

Moustafa handed the phone to Rick. The boy said quickly, "Yes, sir?"

"My dear boy, I am very upset by this affair." Bartouki sounded agitated, even across the miles. "Kemel will try to find out what has been going on. Meanwhile, please give him the model. And accept

my apologies for getting you into such a situation, and my thanks for your loyalty to our model cat. I hope to show my appreciation when you return, and I shall certainly want to hear all about this. But for now, trust Kemel. He is my friend and associate."

Rick promised to do so, said good-by, and hung up. He turned to Moustafa and Scotty. "Mr. Bartouki agrees. We turn the cat over."

Kemel stroked his mustache. "Yes. But first, I must know of these attacks. Can you describe the men who attacked you at the Egyptian Museum?"

Scotty could, and did. He gave complete details of dress and appearance.

The Egyptian shook his head. "I'm afraid the descriptions mean nothing. They did not harm you?"

"They could have," Rick stated. "But they only searched us. We didn't have the cat with us, and it took only seconds for them to find out."

Moustafa's brows creased. "I can make no sense of this. Why would anyone want the cat?"

Rick and Scotty laughed mirthlessly. "That's exactly the same question we asked ourselves a thousand times," Rick said.

"And you made copies of concrete? That was extremely clever of you. I believe you gave one to a man who showed up here?"

Rick described the encounter, and he gave a detailed description of the man. Before he was through, Moustafa was nodding his head.

"I recognize this man! From your description, it can only be one Youssef. He is a well-known thief,

and the leader of a gang. My brother Fuad was once requested to defend him, and refused. Another lawyer with less scruples took the case and got him off."

"But why would a thief want the cat?" Scotty asked.

Moustafa shook his head. "I do not know. Unless he intends to sell the model to a manufacturer, or to produce cats for sale himself. Or, if he knows how much time, money, and planning we have invested in this cat, he may see it as a means of revenge on the Moustafas because Fuad would not take his case."

The answer was logical enough, but it didn't ring true to Rick. At least the revenge part didn't. What had Youssef said? *"I have no sentimental attachment to this object. I merely want it."* A motive of revenge would be emotional, even if not exactly sentimental.

"Why do you carry a pistol?" Rick asked suddenly.

It took Moustafa a moment to reply. "I have enemies," he explained. "I will not bore you with an explanation of why this is, but the reasons are not related to this cat."

"How did you know the cat in the pyramid was not the right one?" Scotty demanded.

Moustafa studied the boy for a long moment before he replied. He shrugged. "I have been a contractor. I know concrete. The cat you brought is of plastic, which does not break. Or, if it does, it breaks differently. From your questions, I see you still harbor suspicions. Was not Bartouki's word enough?"

"It was," Rick said. "Only we'd like to know about

these attacks. Who were the men, and why did they want the cat?"

"Then my explanation does not seem sufficient. I am truly sorry, because we are in your debt. But I cannot tell you more, because I know no more. The only thing I can do is talk to some people I know who may have more clues to Youssef's behavior."

Moustafa's attitude changed subtly. "Now, where is the cat?"

Rick was suddenly glad he didn't have it at hand. "It's in the Egyptian Museum," he said.

Moustafa exploded. "What!"

"That's right," Scotty added coolly. "We saw the men trailing us, so Rick hid the cat in the museum. If he hadn't, the thieves would have it now."

Moustafa sank down into a chair, a hand to his forehead. "But this is terrible! We can never recover it! Surely by now the museum curator has it."

Rick shook his head. "I don't think so. And I'm sure we can recover it."

"But how? Guards swarm everywhere. They are alert, because there was a big robbery not long ago. Everyone is watched. Everyone! I don't understand even how you could hide it without being seen."

"We have our own methods," Rick assured him. "And we'll get the cat back. If you will come here tomorrow night it will be waiting for you."

Moustafa rose and walked to the door. He looked at the boys, and above the luxuriant mustache, dark eyes blazed at them. "It had better be," he said

flatly. "If you are caught by the museum guards you had better say it was a joke. As Americans, you may be believed. Do not connect me, or my brothers, or Bartouki with this thing! But get that cat! I don't care how. But get it!"

He slammed the door behind him.

Rick looked at Scotty. "Get it, or else?"

"Or else," Scotty confirmed. "He didn't say it, but he meant it."

Rick put his thoughts into words. "No one gets that excited over a plastic model. The cat is important for some other reason. But what?"

"I'll ask a different question for a change. Who would you rather have on your trail, Moustafa or Youssef?"

Rick stared at his pal for a long moment while he digested the implications of the question. "I see what you mean," he said finally. "There are two groups after the cat. Right? I've wondered about that myself, since we were rescued by Kemel this morning. So we're caught between a pair of tough characters, like eggs in the jaws of a vise."

Scotty finished grimly, "And right now the jaws are closing. Fast."

A thought struck Rick and he grinned. "How about scrambled eggs for New Year's Eve dinner?"

"What?"

"It's New Year's Eve."

Scotty reached in his pocket and found a pocket calendar. He consulted it. "Hey, you're not kidding!"

"Nope. So, as the year closes, where are we? Caught between Kemel and Youssef."

"Maybe next year will bring better things," Scotty said with a grin.

"Uhuh. But for whom?"

"That," Scotty said, "remains to be seen!"

CHAPTER XIII

# The Space Mystery

THERE was an air of excitement at the project when the boys arrived there the following morning. Everyone was busy on equipment, or studying Sanborn tracings. Winston and Kerama were working a slide rule while Farid read figures.

The boys waited until Winston gave a number, which Kerama marked on the pad he carried. Then the scientist looked up and gave the boys a big grin.

"Happy New Year both of you! Interesting news this morning. Take a look at these."

They were teletype sheets. Rick saw that a machine was now in one corner of the control room, where technicians had finished installing it during the night.

He and Scotty read the messages. Translated from the cryptic notations and abbreviations used by the astronomers, it added up to confirmation of the Egyptian findings by both Jodrell Bank and Green Bank. Both reported that they had also located a source of apparently modulated hydrogen impulses. Both gave the same co-ordinates in space,

in terms of ascension and declination, the way astronomers locate the position of heavenly bodies. Both stated that the finding was remarkable and requested all available data from Sahara Wells, and both announced their intention of concentrating on the object while it was in "view" of their radio telescopes.

Rick looked at Winston, his eyes shining. "Boy! We're on to something big. What's the next step?"

"Next is a precise fix and distance computations by all stations. At the same time, we want two kinds of recordings. We'll continue making Sanborn tapes, but we also want audio-tape recordings."

"You want to actually hear this thing?" Scotty asked. This was unusual, since the radio telescopes ordinarily recorded the incoming signals in trace form on Sanborn strips.

"We don't want to overlook any possibility," Dr. Kerama said. "This is without precedent, and we are not sure how to proceed. Dr. Farid has set up an amplifier on the output circuit, in parallel with the normal system, and he has brought in a pair of tape recorders we borrowed from the government radio station. It may be that listening to this signal will give us clues that our eyes miss when we examine the tracings."

Winston added, "That's your job. I intended to keep you here together, a half day at a time. But this is too important for such considerations, and we haven't a large enough Egyptian staff to handle everything. So I'd like to work you in shifts."

"That's okay," Rick assured him. "When do we start?"

"The object comes up on our horizon shortly after one. Suppose you start then. The first shift can work until five, and the second from five to eleven. One of the Egyptian technicians will take over then until we lose the source below the horizon again."

Hakim Farid took the boys to the tape setup he had established and explained it to them. It was simple enough. The output signal from the receivers was fed into a regular tape-recording circuit. The tapes themselves were on huge reels good for about four hours of recording. It would only be necessary to watch the volume control and to see that all was running smoothly. Changing tapes was only a matter of slapping a new reel into place, dropping the tape into the recording head, and threading it into the empty reel.

"How will we work it?" Scotty asked, while they rechecked the setup and tried out the tape motors.

Rick frowned. "It kind of throws a monkey wrench into our plan, doesn't it?" He and Scotty had worked out a way to recover the Egyptian cat, again with Scotty distracting the guard.

"One of us will have to get it alone," Scotty said.

Rick watched the tape run through and searched his mind for a method. There was only one way he could think of that would get the guard out of the way. "Looks as if that third kitten is going to have a home," he said finally. "I'll wrap it in an old newspaper, then pretend to find it under something. I'll

hand it to the guard. With luck, he'll get so excited he'll run for his boss, thinking someone has tried to steal a museum exhibit. Then I'll snaffle kitty off the shelf and hike out."

Scotty rubbed his chin. "Could work," he said finally. "Unless the guard insists that you go with him."

"No speak Arabic," Rick said. "I won't understand. Let's hope the guard speaks no English."

"Well, if anything goes wrong, Moustafa will just have to wait. So I'll take the first shift and you go get puss. That means I'll be waiting for ol' Kemel alone tonight at the hotel."

"Looks that way."

There seemed to be no solution except to turn the cat over. Bartouki had approved, and the cat was his. Much as the boys hated to let go of an unsolved mystery, there wasn't any other way.

Hassan drove Rick back into town, with the boy sitting in back. He would have preferred to be in the front seat with the dragoman, but the taxi meter took up too much room.

The guide parked directly in front of the museum and asked, "I go with you?"

"Not this time, Hassan. I won't be long." If Rick's trick was to work, no translator should be at hand.

He paid his piastres at the entrance and walked into the huge entrance hall, very conscious of the kitten in his pocket. It was wrapped in a week-old copy of a newspaper recovered from the debris around the new barracks.

When he reached the second floor he acted like a casual museum visitor, taking his time, and working from exhibit to exhibit. But his mind was not on the wonders of ancient Egypt. It wasn't much use to think about the cat, either. All the ground had been covered many times. Instead, he spent the time speculating on the meaning of the mysterious signal from space. Admittedly, he didn't have much knowledge of astrophysics or radio astronomy. But he had never heard of any natural phenomenon in space that emitted pulsed signals in random fashion. Some stars pulsed, like the Cepheid variables, but in an orderly way.

A half hour of speculation led him nowhere so far as the space mystery was concerned, but it did bring him slowly to the museum area that interested him. He nodded politely at the guard, and continued his examination of exhibits, moving finally into the little room where the cat was hidden. Soon he was close enough to see that the Egyptian cat and its antique friend were still in place. He continued on around the room until he came to a glassed-in case that held some rare alabaster figures. Directly before the glass case was a stone jar. It was big enough to hold the kitten.

Rick got ready. His coat was unbuttoned. He put a hand in the outside pocket, ready to swing the coat out so his other hand could remove the kitten from the inside game pocket with one swoop. He watched the guard, using the glass-case front as a mirror.

The guard bent his head to light a cigarette, and

Rick moved. By the time the cigarette was going well, the kitten was in the jar and Rick was looking at the figures in the case again. He waited patiently, and tried identifying the figures so he would seem to be genuinely interested.

The figure with the stylized jackal head was Anubis, the god of death. The hawk-headed one must be Horus. The female figure would be Isis. The one with the solar disc over his head was probably Amon-Ré. The rest he couldn't identify at all. He wondered if one of them was Bubaste, the cat goddess. It would be appropriate.

He drew back a little, first checking to see if the guard was watching, then he bent down and looked into the jar. He put a hand in and brought out the newspaper. He turned it over and hefted it. Then he started to unwrap it.

The guard was at his side in a flash, watching. The reddish form of the cat came into view and the guard snatched it from his hands. Rick turned to him with a look of bewilderment.

The guard unwrapped the kitten completely and held it up, then he turned swiftly and hurried out.

Rick was across the room in two bounds. He grabbed the Egyptian cat and tucked it into his inner pocket, then he closed his coat without buttoning it and hurried after the guard.

The guard hadn't gone far. Rick found him with another guard, gesticulating and waving the cat. Apparently the other guard was an officer, because he had tabs on his shoulder.

The guard with the cat saw Rick and beckoned to him. He walked over, trying to keep his expression interested but unconcerned.

The officer spoke English, but not well. "He say you get this?"

"I see in big jar. Vase. Stone. In newspaper. Someone leave?" Rick did his best to make his reply simple enough for understanding. He apparently succeeded.

"Think someone try steal. Bad."

"Very bad," Rick agreed, straight-faced. "Hope you find. Steal from museum no good."

"No good," the officer agreed.

"Good-by," Rick said. He held his breath waiting for the reaction.

Both guards gave him a half-salute, the courteous gesture he had seen often in Cairo. He bowed and walked toward the stairs.

Not until he was outside did he breathe freely. The cat was a comforting weight in his pocket as he got into Hassan's car. He wondered what the museum officials would think about the kitten. A moment's examination by one of the archaeologists would show that it was of concrete, and new concrete at that. Maybe it would just end up at the *Lost and Found* desk, if they had one.

"Let's go back to the project, Hassan," he directed. Scotty would want to know if he had been successful. Then he could go to the Mena House and have a late lunch while Scotty recorded signals.

If only he didn't have to give the Egyptian cat to

Moustafa—until the mystery was solved. He grinned at his own thought. The cat was no good to him, was it? His only interest was solving the mystery. Why did so many people want it?

He forced himself to think logically. It was old ground, but he went over it again. The cat itself could have no real value. It was plastic, and plastic is cheap. On the other hand, it was valuable as a model, as Bartouki had explained, and Moustafa had confirmed again last night.

Rick wasn't satisfied. A professional thief like Youssef wouldn't be interested in a model. He would want only objects of high value.

There was only one possibility, which Rick and Scotty had considered before, that the cat contained something more than the piece of lead Bartouki had described. But there was no seam in the cat, no sign that it was anything but a solid casting. Still, Rick reasoned, if a piece of lead could be cast into it, so could something of greater value.

He had it! Somewhere in Cairo there must be a company that used X-ray or gamma-ray photography to check large castings. It was a very common method of industrial quality control. Farid or Kerama would know of one, and he could arrange to have the cat X-rayed! It could be done immediately.

Pleased with the idea, he paid attention to his surroundings for the first time since leaving the museum. Hassan was just rounding the corner by Sahara Wells, turning into the new spur that led to the project.

Ahead, across the road, was a caravan of camels. Rick watched, interested. There were a dozen camels, and Arabs in burnooses. Some of the camels seemed to be carrying loads. Like a movie, Rick thought.

Hassan slowed, tooting his horn. The group on the road paid no attention. They weren't going to get out of the way for any old gas burner, Rick thought. Not these traditional ships of the desert.

The car closed the gap, and one of the Arabs turned. Rick gasped. Under the desert headdress a pair of eyes were looking at the car through steel-rimmed glasses.

Youssef!

And Youssef wanted the cat!

CHAPTER XIV

# The Broad Sahara

THERE was no way around the caravan without going into the desert, and the car was too close to turn around. They were trapped!

Rick hurriedly took the cat from his pocket and stuffed it down behind the cushion of the car, pushing until it was well hidden. He knew he would be searched; why else would Youssef come? He hoped a search was all there was to worry about.

Hassan leaned out of his window and shouted imprecations in Arabic, to which the Arabs paid no attention. They closed around the car, and Rick recognized two who had taken part in the attack at the museum—the Sudanese and the big Egyptian who had worn a tarboosh. He also recognized the one he had beaned with the kitten in the pyramid.

He was not among friends, he thought grimly.

Youssef opened the door. "Please get out," he requested. "It will be easier if you co-operate."

Rick looked at the odds and had to agree. He got out. Hassan was right behind him, still shouting in Arabic.

An Arab stepped up behind the guide and slugged

him. Rick started to yell a protest, then a burnoose was tossed over his head and wrapped tightly around his chest, blocking out the light. He struggled, and was pushed to the ground. In a moment he was rolled over and knew they were wrapping him in a blanket or a rug.

He felt pressure as ropes bound him tight, then he was lifted and placed on something hard, stomach down, like a sack of meal on a chair. The chair lifted and rocked, and he heard loud groans, as though of a soul in mortal pain.

He was on one of the camels, and the beast was protesting!

Swaying motion began, and he knew his ungainly steed was underway.

For a moment he seemed to see himself from a distance, wrapped like Cleopatra in a rug, tossed on a camel like a bag of old clothes, and carted unceremoniously away by a band of Arabs. The picture was so ridiculous that he had to grin, in spite of the discomfort and the foul air that reached him through the dirty burnoose.

Then realization hit him. Youssef was in charge, and Youssef was a tough professional thief who intended to get the cat. Where was the thief taking him?

Sudden fear ran through his thoughts.

The camel swayed and jogged along for what seemed hours to Rick. Now and then he could hear voices, but he made no sense out of the Arabic. The camels complained constantly, and he felt like

moaning with them. His stomach hurt from the constant rubbing across the saddle and both legs were asleep from the tight wrapping. His head dangled down, and now and then his nose banged when the camel lurched. He couldn't remember ever having been so uncomfortable for so long.

It seemed forever before the camel stopped. Rick hung over the saddle unprotestingly. There was nothing he could do but wait. Finally the camel lurched forward and Rick thought he would be thrown off, then the animal leveled again. The camel had knelt, still complaining.

Hands pulled Rick from the saddle and he felt someone at work on his bonds while the hands held him upright. Suddenly the burnoose was whipped off, and the brilliant sunlight made his eyes water. He squinted against the glare.

An Arab finished unwrapping him and stood back. He would have fallen except for the hands that still held him from behind. He looked over his shoulder and the big Sudanese grinned at him. He didn't feel like grinning back.

When his eyes were adjusted to the sun, he looked around. There was desert in all directions, no sign of civilization anywhere. Immediately before him was an ancient stone structure, nearly buried by the sands.

Youssef walked around one of the camels carrying a desert water bag. The thief lifted it, and water poured into his mouth in a thin stream. Rick licked his lips. "I'd like some of that," he said.

Youssef recorked the bag. "Doubtless," he agreed. "Mr. Brant, I size you up as what you Americans term a stubborn case. However, I am prepared to drop this whole affair right now—if you will turn over the cat without further trouble."

"We gave you a cat," Rick reminded.

"Yes. But not the right one."

"How do you know it isn't the right one?" Rick demanded.

Youssef smiled. "Shall we say that I had a cat expert examine it? Let it go, Mr. Brant. We both know you still have the one I want."

"But why do you want it?" Rick asked. He couldn't help asking, even though this obviously was not the time for friendly banter.

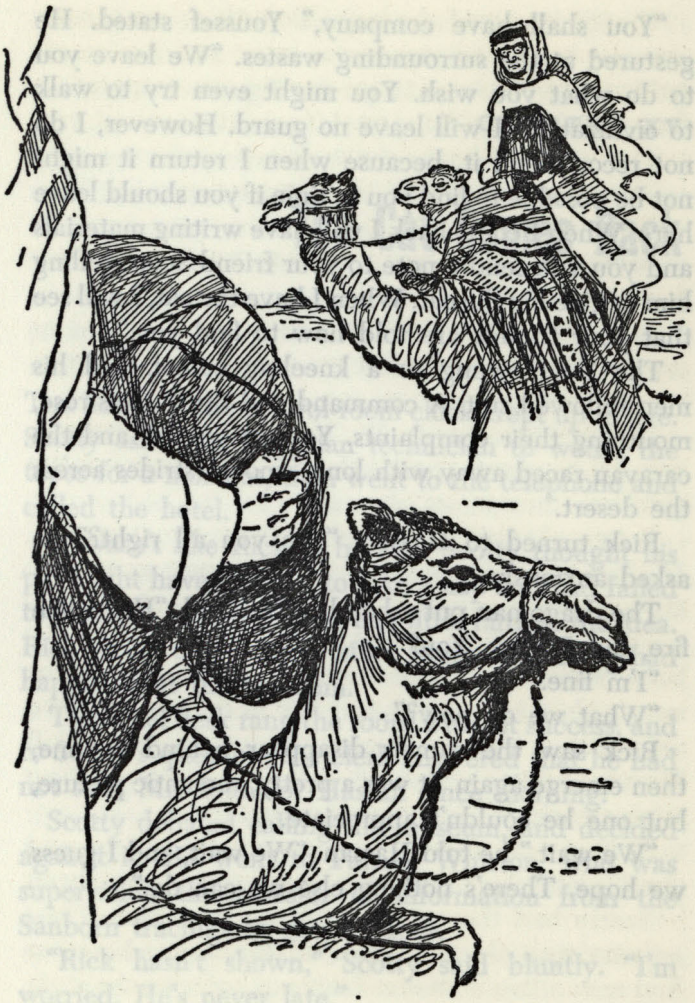
"I want it. That is enough. Will you give it to me?"

"I can't," Rick explained. "It must be turned over to Moustafa." He didn't say which Moustafa.

The thief sighed. "Then I was right. You are stubborn. Well, stubbornness is like starch. It does not last. In this case, we will let the desert and thirst take the starch out of you. After a few days here you will beg me to take the cat. But it is all so foolish, and so unnecessary! Why not be reasonable?"

Rick looked around at the endless, shimmering dunes of the Sahara, and he wanted desperately to be reasonable. He couldn't. "Sorry," he said.

"Very well. On your head be it." Youssef called in Arabic and two men lifted down a huge bundle from one of the camels. They unwrapped it, and Hassan swayed and blinked in the glaring sun.



*Hands pulled Rick from the saddle*

"You shall have company," Youssef stated. He gestured at the surrounding wastes. "We leave you to do what you wish. You might even try to walk to civilization. I will leave no guard. However, I do not recommend it, because when I return it might not be possible to find you in time if you should leave here. When I come back I will have writing materials and you will send a note to your friend Scott, telling him to give me the cat. When I have the cat, I will see that your friends are told how to find you."

The thief swung to a kneeling camel, and his men followed suit. A command and the camels rose, mouthing their complaints. Youssef waved, and the caravan raced away with long, smooth strides across the desert.

Rick turned to Hassan. "Are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

The dragoman put a hand to his head. "Hurts like fire, but I okay. You?"

"I'm fine."

"What we do now?"

Rick saw the camels disappear behind a dune, then emerge again. It was a pretty, romantic picture, but one he couldn't appreciate.

"We wait," he told Hassan. "We wait, and I guess we hope. There's nothing else we can do."

CHAPTER XV

# The Cat Comes Back

THE hands of the control-room clock crept up to five. Scotty asked an Egyptian technician to watch the tapes for a moment, then went to the telephone and called the hotel.

It wasn't like Rick to be late. Scotty thought his pal might have decided to take a nap and had failed to wake up in time, but he had little faith in the idea. Rick wasn't a nap taker. More likely, something had happened at the museum.

The hotel desk rang the room without success, and to Scotty's question, the clerk answered that he had not seen Mr. Brant or Hassan since morning.

Scotty debated calling the museum, and decided against it. He went to Parnell Winston, who was supervising the transfer of information from the Sanborn tracings to graph paper.

"Rick hasn't shown," Scotty said bluntly. "I'm worried. He's never late."

Winston glanced up. "Could Hassan's car have broken down?"

"Could be, but I don't think so. Rick could have gotten a taxi anywhere on the route. Besides, he was going to the museum to get the Egyptian cat. Something might have happened."

The scientist knew the two boys from long association, and they had kept him informed of their various adventures. In spite of his preoccupation with the project he had been interested in their cat mystery and had been keeping an eye on them. Winston hadn't noticed that Rick was late, but he was worried too, now that it was called to his attention.

"Go find him, Scotty. Dr. Kerama's driver can take you. I'll have one of the others watch the tapes. But get back as soon as you can."

Scotty planned his search on the way into town. He had the car take him to the museum as soon as they arrived in Cairo. The museum was closed, but questioning of the guard disclosed that Rick had been there, and had "found" an unusual statue wrapped in newspaper and left in an urn. It was a new statue, the guard captain said, probably left by some visitor who had disobeyed the sign about taking packages into the museum.

So Rick had carried out the plan and had rescued the Egyptian cat. Now the museum had the kitten.

Scotty had the car take him to the hotel. There was no sign of either Rick or Hassan, and no one had seen either of them. Scotty questioned the clerk, the doorman, the hall porter, the room maid, and the dragomen who waited for business in the narrow

street between the Semiramis and the Shepheard's hotels.

Finally, he found a dragoman who knew nothing of their whereabouts, but added, "Why you not wait in room? They not far. Hassan's car here."

"Where?" Scotty demanded quickly.

"Out back. In alley."

Scotty ran. The dragoman was right! Hassan's car was parked in the usual place. He looked around to see who might have been working in the area, someone who might know when the car had arrived.

A window in the hotel kitchen opened into the alley above the car and a cook was looking out. Scotty found the door and hurried into the hotel. He worked his way through rooms and corridors until he found the kitchen. He saw that the cook was a salad maker who apparently worked at a bench right next to the window, but to his questions the man shook his head. He spoke no English.

Additional searching produced the chief cook, whose English was good. He relayed Scotty's questions and the cook's answers.

"He say car come while he cleaning up after lunchtime. He see stranger driving. So he lean out and ask where is Hassan. Stranger say he is the cousin of Hassan and Hassan lend him car. That is all. Cousin lock up car and go away."

It was enough. But Scotty's elation over finding a clue was tempered by the realization that a stranger driving Hassan's car could mean that Rick and the dragoman were in real danger. He did not know

whether or not Hassan had any cousins, but he was certain the guide would not have loaned the car while on a job.

Scotty ran into the alley and tried all the doors. If Rick had managed to leave a note or any clue in the car, Scotty wanted it. Locked doors weren't going to stop him!

He searched the alley until he found a piece of stiff wire. He bent one end into a hook. Then, with his jackknife, he pried one of the no-draft windows open just far enough to slip the wire in. He wedged the window with a piece of wood and began fishing.

It took long, patient minutes to hook a door handle, then more time to maneuver the wire into position. By the time he was ready for the last step, the cooks and some of the dragomen were watching. He paid no attention. Holding his breath, he exerted pressure on the wire. The inner handle turned, the latch clicked. The door was unlocked.

Scotty started in the front seat and went over the car methodically. He found nothing. Finally, only the cushions were left. He pulled the front one away and examined the debris that seems to collect under car seats. He put the cushion back and went to the rear one.

He lifted the seat out—and disclosed the Egyptian cat, in back of the cushion where Rick had stuffed it.

Scotty examined it, his heart racing. He hurriedly set things to rights in the car, closed the car door, and hurried into the hotel.

He knew Rick, and he knew his pal wouldn't

have parted with the cat except for one reason: to protect it. That meant Rick had expected to be searched.

Scotty followed the thought forward, logically. Rick had hidden the cat, then he and Hassan had been taken from the car. A "cousin" had brought it back to the hotel. Why? Scotty didn't know the answer to that, unless Rick and Hassan had been taken in some location where an abandoned car would have attracted attention. That wouldn't be in the city, because who would pay any attention to a car parked and locked at the curb?

But if not in the city, where? Somewhere in the desert was Scotty's guess. The desert was on both sides of the river, both north and south of Cairo. He could assume that the two had headed for the project, or that they had gone north for some reason he couldn't imagine.

He dropped the line of thought; it was getting nowhere. One thing was clear: whoever had taken Rick and Hassan hadn't suspected that Rick actually had the cat with him.

The cat had to be the reason. Someone who wanted it had decided on direct action. Scotty opened the door of the room he shared with Rick and looked about him unhappily, not really seeing anything. He knew Rick's captors would not have an easy time making his pal talk. And even when Rick did open up, he would spin some kind of yarn that would throw them off the trail. Scotty thought that Rick would not be in any great danger until he dis-

closed the cat's whereabouts. But he didn't like the idea of what Rick would have to go through before then.

The question was who had taken him?

There were two possibilities: Moustafa and Youssef. So far as Third Brother knew, the cat was to be delivered to him at the hotel that night. On the other hand, Youssef's men had searched them in front of the museum, and later Rick had handed Youssef a kitten. The thief must have found out that the kitten was a fake.

Scotty picked up the room telephone and called the project. In a moment he had Winston on the line. "Rick's gone," he said tersely. "Hassan, too. The car was brought to the hotel by a stranger. Rick left the cat in the car, behind the rear cushion. He wouldn't do that unless he knew he was going to be searched. My guess is that Youssef snatched them. I think it's time we got the police in on this!"

CHAPTER XVI

# The Howling Jackals

Tourists travel thousands of miles to see the full moon rise over the Sahara Desert. It is a sight of lonely, majestic grandeur. The rolling contours of sand and rock assume weird, lovely patterns, and even the desert wind is hushed. It is at such times, men say, that the spirits of the ancient Egyptian gods, Amon-Ré, Horus, Thoth, Isis, Osiris, Bubaste, and the others again walk on earth.

Rick Brant could appreciate the scene, but he was in no mood for it. He clutched his coat around him more tightly to keep out the penetrating desert chill. From behind a nearby dune he heard the rising, yapping howl of a jackal, one of earth's loneliest sounds.

Anubis, Egyptian god of death, had the head of a jackal, he recalled. He tried to wet his lips. He was terribly thirsty.

Hassan had been stretched out on the sand. He rose to a sitting position and gestured toward the dune that shielded the jackal from sight. "He noisy."

Rick nodded. "Do jackals always bark at night?"

"Always. It is their kismet."

Their fate, Rick thought. Born to bark at the empty desert. He wondered if the little doglike animals enjoyed it. "Do they always bark at nothing?"

"No. Sometimes they bark at people. Like now. He bark at us."

Rick grinned feebly. "He doesn't like us using his desert. Well, I'd be happy to give it back to him."

The dragoman nodded. "Also. You know, when our people want to say time go by . . . how you say? . . . life goes on and no man can stop time or make much change in things, they speak of the jackal."

Rick looked at the guide with interest. He had been glad all through the long hours of Hassan's presence. The Sudanese had turned out to be an entertaining and thought-provoking companion. "Is it a saying of some kind?" he asked.

Hassan nodded. "The little jackal barks—but the caravan passes."

Rick repeated the expression thoughtfully. It said a great deal. "I'll remember that, Hassan."

There was something he had wanted to ask. "May I ask a personal question?"

The guide spread his hands expressively. "You hired a dragoman, but he has become your friend. Ask what you will."

"Thank you, Hassan. Scotty and I think of you

as a friend, too. I wanted to ask about your English. You've been speaking very good English to me all day, but until we were captured, you spoke sort of broken English."

Hassan chuckled softly. "It is part of show I put on. My clients talk too simple English to me most of the time. They don't expect me to know good English. So I do not speak as well as I can. Now, with you and Scotty, it is different. My broken English is habit, so I continue to speak it until today. But I knew it would be different with you when we had coffee together, and when we laughed together. That was when I knew I could leave my show clothes at home and dress in a suit."

Rick laughed with him. "So that's why you wore fancy stuff only that first day. But, Hassan, if you can't read or write, how did you learn such good English?"

"I am like a parrot," Hassan replied. "I hear, and I repeat. For four years I was houseboy to an American family, from USIS, what you call the United States Information Service."

"They taught you English?" Rick prompted.

"I knew some, but we helped each other. I teached them Arab talk, and they correct me when I speak American."

Hassan launched into a recital of his years with the Americans, who had been transferred to India, but still wrote to him now and then. Rick listened with only part of his mind. For the most, his thoughts went back over ground he had covered before, since

Youssef had dumped the two of them next to an ancient crypt.

The big question was, of course, what would happen to them?

As though in answer, the little jackal appeared silhouetted on top of the dune. He lifted his head to the full moon, and his voice rose in a prolonged, yapping howl. Then, as suddenly, he was gone again.

Rick gave an involuntary shiver. By the time Youssef returned, he would be in bad shape from thirst. He wondered how long he could hold out, and in the same instant wondered why he should. There was some real value attached to the cat. It was not manufacturing rights or sales, and it was not revenge. He was sure of that.

Youssef had said that he had no sentimental attachment to the cat. He had also said he disliked unnecessary violence. Rick wondered what the thief considered "unnecessary."

What else could he recall of Youssef's talk? He had said that the cat was not important, that it had elements of value to some people, and that he never lied. If one took his words at face value and believed him, then the cat itself was not important. What did that leave? Rick could see only one thing: that it was important only because it *contained* something. Youssef's words simply reinforced the conclusion he and Scotty already had reached.

"Elements of value to a few people," Youssef had said. That might mean only a few people knew what

the cat contained. If you didn't know, it was only a plastic cat. If you did know what it contained . . . well, Youssef knew, and he wanted the cat badly enough to risk a kidnaping.

Rick wondered where the cat was now. He had no idea of what had happened to Hassan's car. If it was left on the road and not searched, Scotty or someone from the project would recognize it. Scotty would certainly search the car, and he would find kitty. It was what Rick would do, and he and Scotty thought alike on many things.

Hassan finished his recital of a trip to the Valley of the Kings with his American employers and Rick took advantage of the lull to borrow a match. He lighted it and looked at his watch. It was nearly midnight.

Had Scotty met Kemel Moustafa at seven? Rick thought he probably had, and wondered what Third Brother's reaction to his mysterious disappearance had been. If Scotty had the cat, had he delivered it? Rick thought not. Scotty would keep the cat, for bargaining purposes.

He found himself yawning. "Hassan, when do you think Youssef will come back?"

"If he wants us alive and able to talk, maybe day after tomorrow. If not—*la samah Allah!*—maybe longer.

"What's *la samah Allah?*" Rick stumbled over the pronunciation.

"God forbid," Hassan said grimly.

"Amen," Rick echoed.

He shifted position. "We'd better get some sleep. Should we go into the crypt or stay out here?"

The crypt was only a cubic chamber of rough stone, partly filled with drifting sand. Desert winds had been alternately covering and uncovering it for centuries.

"Stay out here until morning. Then we go in out of sun, like today. Youssef good to us. With no shelter from the sun, we would not last long."

"He's a fine fellow," Rick said without heat. "Good night, Hassan."

"*Leltak s'aeeda,* Rick. Good night to you."

The boy curled up in a ball, knees tucked into stomach, head resting on one arm. He covered up as much as possible with the short coat, squirmed until he had a depression for his hip in the sand, and closed his eyes.

On the nearby dune the little jackal peeked over the top at the two prone figures and sang his vast displeasure to the moon. From faraway a friend or relative joined in the serenade. It was the last thing Rick heard.

Hassan shook him. "Rick! Awaken, please! Camels coming."

Rick came back to reality from a dream of emptiness and loneliness in a darkened desert. The moon had set and false dawn was burning on the far horizon. He shook his head blearily. "What? Who's coming?"

"Not know. I woke and saw camels on the sky."

"In the east?"

"Yes. Against sky."

Rick shivered in the biting chill of early morning. He doubted that any legitimate travelers came this way. Youssef would not have left them near a caravan route. He could only guess that the thief himself was coming back, and he grew colder at the thought. Perhaps Youssef had decided not to wait to soften Rick up. On the other hand, there was a remote possibility he had the cat. If he was a thief with honor, he might simply be coming to take them back.

The idea seemed unlikely. Scotty wouldn't give up the cat, except in exchange for the two of them. If Youssef had found it himself, it was hours ago. He wouldn't have waited to search Hassan's car, if he had ever intended to search it.

An inner voice urged, "Tell him where the cat is. It's not your cat, and there's no reason to believe that Kemel Moustafa has any more right to what's inside of it than Youssef has."

But there was a deep streak of stubbornness in the Brants, which Rick had inherited. He knew he wouldn't give in until he absolutely had to. When that time came he would tell Youssef the truth, that he had hidden the cat in the Egyptian Museum. What he would not say was that the cat had been recovered and that he had left it in Hassan's car.

False dawn had faded. It was nearly black, except for myriad stars. Hassan lay with his ear to the ground. Rick held perfectly still and waited.

Finally Hassan sat up. "Close now," he whispered.

Rick wondered briefly if they shouldn't put up a fight, but he knew it would be useless. Youssef had too many men.

The camels appeared like wraiths from behind the dune, and Rick blinked trying to see more clearly.

There were three, and only one of them carried a rider. He waited tensely for the rest of the band to appear.

The camels arrived and Rick whispered urgently, "The rest must be behind. Jump him and we'll grab the camels and make a run for it."

Hassan tensed. "Yes. Be ready."

The camel rider came close, and lifted a hand in greeting. *"Assalamo alaikum. Fil khedma, ya sidi. Ana gay men sidi Moustafa."*

Rick was tensed to spring, to haul the man from his saddle, when Hassan put a hand on his arm. "Wait. He say greeting, he is at your service, and he come from Mr. Moustafa!"

Rick watched in unbelieving amazement as the driver forced his groaning camel to kneel, then immediately commanded the other two to kneel also. When the camel's protests had ceased, Hassan spoke to him rapidly. The man answered at length.

"He was with Youssef," Hassan said. "But he is also in the pay of Kemel Moustafa. Last night he went to Moustafa and told him about us. Moustafa sent him to bring us back."

Rick hesitated. Could they trust this man? But it was a silly question, because he knew he had no

choice. Anything was better than sitting in the desert and waiting.

"Ask if he has water, then we'll go with him."

The man did, a full water bag. They drank sparingly, knowing the danger of too much water after deprivation. Then the three mounted the camels. Rick held onto the horn in front of him as the mount lurched protestingly to its feet, then they were going across the sands to the east at what seemed incredible speed. Ahead of them, the first flush of real dawn was visible.

The sun was high before they came within sight of the first man-made objects in the desert. Rick saw pyramids, but not those of Giza. He called to Hassan, who was riding his swaying mount like a veteran.

"What pyramids are those, Hassan?"

"Sakkarah," the dragoman replied. "We come back long way around."

To the east, then the south, Rick thought. He was by no means sure of what would be waiting, but at least he knew where he was. Sakkarah, a "must" for tourists, Bartouki had said. Well, he was getting there, even though he had taken the hard way.

On the road near Sakkarah a car was waiting, and in it was Kemel Moustafa. The cameleer made the mounts kneel. Rick and Hassan got off, and the man with the camels hurried away without a word. The two walked up to the car.

"Thank you for rescuing us," Rick said politely.

Moustafa had not spoken. Now he tugged at his

mustache and nodded. "Whether it was worth while remains to be seen. According to my man, Youssef did not get the cat. This is correct?"

"Yes. Did you see my friend last night?"

"I did. Precisely at seven. He informed me that you were missing. Then, sometime later, my man managed to leave Youssef's gang and report in. I at once made plans for your rescue. Now tell me. Where is the cat?"

Rick was very, very tired of the Egyptian cat. He thought grimly that when he returned home he and his sister would have a long talk about volunteering services for strangers.

"The cat is under the back cushion of Hassan's car," he said tiredly. "And the sooner you take it off my hands, the better."

"Hassan's car is at the hotel," Moustafa said. "Come. We will go there at once."

Rick and Hassan climbed into the car and Moustafa raced the motor. He meshed gears and spun his wheels as he got off to a fast start.

He's certainly in a hurry to get that cat, Rick thought. Well, he was the legitimate receiver. Only it was too bad to let the animal go without ever knowing what it contained.

No matter, Rick thought, as the desert road sped underneath. No matter now. In a few minutes it will be finished.

CHAPTER XVII

# Ismail ben Adhem

Rick awoke with the setting sun in his eyes. He yawned luxuriously and turned over to look at the clock, then sat upright in bed at the sight of Scotty and a stranger.

The stranger was young, with a friendly smile. He was relaxed as he sat in a comfortable chair, but it was the same kind of relaxation one sees in a panther or another of the great cats. Rick knew, without even asking, that this lean, bronzed, good-looking Egyptian was a police officer and that he probably was a very good one. He *looked* like a hunter.

"Thought you were going to sleep till tomorrow," Scotty said. "Rick, this is Inspector Ismail ben Adhem of the Cairo Police."

The inspector held out a brown hand. Rick sensed the strength in it, although the handshake was normal. "I'm glad you're here," the boy said frankly. "Between Youssef and Kemel Moustafa, we're sort of in a jam."

The inspector smiled. "We'll see if we can get you out of it. Suppose you call me Ben, just to make things easy. Now, Scotty has given me a detailed re-

port of your activities up to the time you left the project yesterday. Suppose we pick up from there?"

"Okay. Can I order breakfast first?"

"Of course. Forgive my impatience. We can talk at leisure over coffee."

Rick placed the order, then launched into a recital of yesterday's events, including his night in the desert and rescue by Kemel Moustafa. He concluded, "We came back to the hotel. Hassan opened the car, and the cat was gone. Of course I had no idea what had happened to it. Moustafa turned black with rage. He said I had a clear choice of getting the cat back and turning it over to him, or having something unpleasant happen. He'll be back at seven. He wasn't joking."

"No," Ben agreed. "I know this man, and he does not joke. What then?"

"I sent Hassan home to get some rest, and I came up to the room and called the project. Scotty answered. He told me Felix was safe, so I knew he had the cat, and he told me the police had been called in. I just fell into bed and went to sleep. That's it."

"It's enough," the inspector said. "Of course neither of you had any way of knowing what was going on. You had merely undertaken to do a favor for an acquaintance. I just wish some kind wind had whispered to you the idea of reporting to us after that first day in El Mouski."

"I guess we were wrong," Rick admitted. "At first it didn't seem like a matter for the police. Later, we just didn't think of it."

"I understand. But it doesn't pay to be too independent in a strange land, I assure you. Ask Steve Ames."

The boys stared in amazement. Steve Ames was a close friend, and their contact in JANIG, one of the top American government security organizations.

"How do you know Steve?" Rick asked in astonishment.

"He and I went through the FBI Academy together. We keep in touch. Also, the International Police Organization, which is called Interpol, keeps us up to date on developments. I know that your scientific group works closely with Steve."

So Ismail ben Adhem was an FBI graduate! Rick looked at him with new respect. "I guess we should have reported to you," he said. "We just didn't know."

"No matter. It will all work out, anyway. In fact, your delay in contacting us may even make things simpler."

"How?" Scotty asked.

Ben shrugged. "We will see. This cat of yours has many interesting possibilities."

"Do you know why the cat is important?" Rick demanded.

"I have an idea. But please do not press me for details. It is better for everything to go on normally while I do a little useful work. So, I suggest you two continue on as before, with only one difference. You will use a different taxi to travel back and forth to Sahara Wells."

"But Hassan is our dragoman," Rick protested.

"What's more, he's a friend. We can't switch now, after we engaged him for the duration of our stay."

Ben smiled warmly. "Your loyalty to Hassan does you credit. But don't worry. He will be taken care of. You and I will trade transportation. I will use Hassan, and you will use my taxi."

"I don't get it," Scotty said.

"It's simple. Both of you are able to testify to criminal actions on the part of Youssef. Also, if this works out as I hope, you will have testimony to give on the actions of Kemel Moustafa. Now, if you knew there was evidence against you, and you were completely ruthless, what would you do?"

"Remove the evidence," Rick said slowly. His eyes met Scotty's.

"Exactly. So, Hassan stays with me, and your taxi driver will be one of my best officers. He will stay with you at all times. While you are in the hotel, another of my men will be your hall porter."

"Do you really think we're in any danger?" Scotty asked.

"Don't ever doubt it, Scotty. Be on guard at all times."

"It's because the cat is very important," Rick stated. "And the cat is important because of something inside of it. You know what that something is."

"An excellent deduction," Ben agreed with a grin. "All but the last statement. I do not know what it is. I merely suspect. My evidence is circumstantial. I'll tell you this much, though. I know a great deal about

certain interests of the Moustafa brothers, and I was informed by Interpol that there is an interesting gentleman of great wealth in San Francisco who talks too much."

Rick thought over the statement. It didn't help at all. He couldn't see what a talkative man in California had to do with the Egyptian cat. "That's not very informative," he objected.

Ben laughed. "I'm sure it isn't. But I'll make you a promise. Before you leave Egypt, we will perform a small operation on the cat and remove its appendix—or whatever else it may have inside."

"We'll hold you to that," Scotty told him.

Rick's breakfast arrived, and over *café au lait* and Egyptian rolls Ismail ben Adhem questioned Rick until he was sure he had extracted all the information the two boys had.

It suddenly occurred to Rick that he had asked no questions himself. "Where's the cat?" he demanded.

"At the project," Scotty replied. "I was going to turn it over to Ben, but he said to leave it there."

"It might be uncomfortable at the station," Ben added with a twinkle. "After all, it's a well-cared-for pet."

Rick grinned. "We've grown fond of it," he admitted. "Second question: can't you just pick up Youssef on a kidnaping charge?"

"We could, if we knew where to find him. But Youssef is a hard man to locate when he goes underground. We've been trying to get something on him for years, and we know him well. This time he's over-

played his hand and we've got him. It's only a question of time."

"How about Moustafa?" Rick asked. "Is he guilty of anything?"

The police officer finished his coffee and rose. "Not yet," he said. "But he will be. Now, stay together at all times. Ride with the taxi driver who will be waiting for you in the hall. Otherwise, go about your business as usual, and have a good time."

Scotty saw him to the door, then turned to Rick. "Moustafa isn't guilty of anything yet, but he will be. That's interesting."

Rick thought so, too. "Isn't it pretty careless, leaving the cat at the project?"

"Seems so," Scotty agreed. "But I think Ben knows what he's doing."

"I guess you're right," Rick said soberly.

After more coffee and a shower, he felt like himself again. There was work to do at the project, so the two boys picked up the police driver, who was keeping an eye on their door, and rode to the project.

The scientists greeted Rick happily. "We were pretty worried for a while," Winston said, and the Egyptians echoed him.

"We don't usually treat tourists this way," Farid said jokingly, but behind the smile Rick sensed that the Egyptian scientist was embarrassed by what had happened to a guest.

"I got myself into it," Rick pointed out. "If we had gone to the police about the Egyptian cat that first day, there would have been no trouble."

Dr. Kerama put a hand on his shoulder. "It is very kind of you to try to save our feelings. But we were so involved in this fascinating problem that we simply didn't pay enough attention. Otherwise, we could have advised you to see the police."

"How is it going?" Rick asked.

"Very well," Farid said. "We're exchanging reports constantly with the other radio telescopes and it's clear that we have something extraordinary. We're trying to agree on the precise location of this space object. The next step will be to examine the signals more closely to see if a pattern can be found or if they're simply random."

"If you and Scotty feel up to it," Winston added, "we'd like you to duplicate the audio tapes for us. We want to send a set right away to Green Bank. They started audio recording, too, yesterday, but they don't have the hours when the object was in sight of our telescope but not theirs. They're duplicating the signals we didn't get after the object dropped below our horizon. That way we'll both have a complete record for analysis."

"What is the space object?" Rick asked.

Winston shook his head. "We don't know. It's too early even to speculate much. Can you make the duplicates?"

It was early evening. "We can get sandwiches at the Mena House and work until we're finished," Rick replied. "That will get us home before midnight. There can't be more than a few hours to record."

"Fine. You'll be alone, but since the inspector put

a police guard on you, I'm sure it will be all right."

Farid had arranged the technical setup, using another unit borrowed from the government radio station for the purpose. All they would need to do was feed tape into the machines and watch the recording level.

One of the Egyptian technicians drove to the Mena House and brought back sandwiches and cokes. The scientists departed, to have a quick dinner and then resume work at a different location where a computer was available to do the complicated mathematics required for analysis of the data.

Rick and Scotty started work right away. The police driver sat in a chair and watched them. He spoke English, but wasn't much of a conversationalist. After a while the boys forgot he was there.

Listening to the space signal was strange. As the tape ran through, Rick was certain his ear detected a kind of pattern in the sounds. There was a continuous hiss; that was normal hydrogen on the 21-centimeter wave length. Then there were sharper hisses, as though some strange creature was trying to send a coded message through the noisy hydrogen background.

"It's a message of some kind," Rick stated. "I'll bet on it."

"Who sends messages from space?" Scotty asked with a grin. "Ghouls, ghosties, or long-legged beasties?"

"Don't laugh," Rick said impatiently. "Didn't you ever hear of Project Ozma?"

Scotty hadn't. "The wizard of Ozma?"

"The name comes from Princess Ozma of Oz, I guess, but it was the first project to use the Green Bank telescope to try to locate intelligent signals from space. Stuff exactly like this."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope. On the level."

Scotty listened to the continuous signal, his face thoughtful. "Maybe there is intelligence behind it. And maybe not. I don't get much of a pattern out of the sounds."

"Maybe the seven-eyed men of the planet Glup don't have rhythm," Rick began. "Anyway . . ."

He never finished the sentence. The control-room door slammed open. Arabs crashed through, bringing the police guard to his feet with a bound. He snatched a pistol from a shoulder holster and got off two shots before an answering shot caught him and spun him around with the impact. The police guard slid slowly to the floor!

CHAPTER XVIII

# The Fight at Sahara Wells

THE pistol dropped from the police driver's nerveless hand and Scotty leaped. Rick dropped to the floor as his pal picked up the pistol and rolled, shooting as he turned. His second shot caught an Arab and slammed him back into the others who were trying to crowd in.

Rick looked frantically for a weapon. The only thing in sight was a heavy ceramic ash tray that the guard's fall had knocked to the floor. He grabbed it and threw, rising to one elbow. The ash tray caught an Arab in the throat. Someone shot, and chips flew from the cement floor next to Rick's head. He rolled away.

Scotty aimed with care, as coolly as though he stood on the range back home. He squeezed the trigger and was rewarded by a choked yell from beyond the doorway. He fired again, and a burnoosed figure grabbed the doorframe for support.

The Arabs beyond the doorway had dived for cover, leaving the doorframe clear except for the most recent victim of Scotty's shooting and the one Rick had hit. He was lying on the floor with both

hands clutched to his throat, gagging and gasping for air.

A headdress was thrust around the frame and Scotty squeezed off a quick shot. The hammer clicked harmlessly. He was out of ammunition! He threw the pistol and the head vanished.

Both boys got to their feet and crouched to rush any newcomers. They whirled at the tinkle of broken glass behind them.

Youssef stood in the window, a Sten gun trained on them. Rick looked at the deadly little submachine gun and gulped. He remembered what Ben had said about removing the evidence.

The thief said, "Put both hands on top of your heads."

The boys did so, with no hesitation. In spite of Youssef's apparently casual manner, both knew he would not hesitate to shoot. He raised his voice and shouted in Arabic. The boys stiffened as footsteps sounded behind them and gun muzzles were thrust into their backs. Youssef vanished from the window and reappeared in a moment through the door.

"You're a difficult young man," he told Rick. "But the time for being difficult is over. I want the cat, now."

"I left it in Hassan's car," Rick said, with pretended hopelessness.

Youssef spoke in Arabic. The pressure of the gun muzzle left Rick's back. He felt a cord being slipped around his forehead, a cord with hard knots that fell across his temples.

"What you feel is a strangler's cord," the thief said grimly. "Don't be a fool. The cat means nothing to you; you were merely a messenger boy. Give me the cat and you will be left alone."

"Not until the evidence is destroyed," Rick thought. "Not until we're dead."

"It's in the car," he repeated.

Youssef lost his composure. He snapped an order in Arabic and the cord tightened. Rick gritted his teeth. Next to him, Scotty bent forward.

"Don't try it," the thief grated. "I only need one of you." His black eyes bored into Rick's. "One of my men watched you and Moustafa search Hassan's car this morning. The cat was not there. Where is it?"

Rick started to shout that he didn't know, when a burst of shooting accompanied by wild yells broke out outside. Youssef spoke quickly in Arabic, then turned to the boys. "Sit down in those chairs. Move, and you die. I will deal with you when I have found out what this is all about."

The shooting gained in volume and the yells increased. The boys took the seats and stared at the big Sudanese, who was covering them with the Sten gun. The strangler's cord was draped carelessly about his neck.

"That's a real gun fight outside," Scotty whispered.

Rick nodded. He could detect several guns of different calibers, and the chatter of Sten guns was distinctive. What was going on?

The shooting lessened, then stopped altogether. The shouting increased. The big Sudanese kept

glancing over his shoulder at the doorway, as though fearful of what he might see, but he always glanced back too quickly for the boys to act.

"Watch it," Scotty said from the corner of his mouth. Rick casually got his feet under him and tensed.

Scotty's eyes opened wide and he choked, "Inspector!"

The Sudanese whirled, Sten gun ready, and the boys left their chairs in a bound. Rick dove for the thief's knees while Scotty smashed straight into him like a battering ram. The big man toppled over backward, his blazing Sten gun chipping plaster from the ceiling.

Rick let go of his grip on the knees and clawed for the man's throat. Scotty concentrated on the Sten gun, grabbing the hot barrel and bending backward.

The big Sudanese heaved, and Rick felt as though he was a terrier hanging to a wild bull. The man was incredibly strong. The boy grabbed his throat in one hand and fended off crushing blows with the other.

He was concentrating so hard on holding his grip that a newcomer who ran into the control room had to yell. "Get up, I said. All of you!" A heavy foot crashed down on the Sten gun and held it.

Rick looked up, dazed with effort, into the cold face of Kemel Moustafa. Third Brother had a Luger automatic, and he looked ready to use it.

The boys rolled away and got to their feet. The Sudanese got to his knees and started to get up. Mous-

tafa struck with the Luger and the man collapsed.

The pistol muzzle pointed at Rick. "You double-crossed me," Moustafa grated. "You were supposed to give me the cat an hour ago at the hotel. Fortunately, I had one of my men follow Youssef, because I suspected he would find the cat sooner or later. Give it to me."

"Your men must have won the fight," Rick ventured.

"They did. Conversation will not help. I have thought about this, and I am certain Youssef did not get the cat. His presence here confirms it. Also, I believe that you thought it was in the car until we searched. If Youssef did not take it, your own friend did. You would not leave it in the hotel, so it must be here. Either you give it to me freely, or I will shoot you and take my chances on finding it."

Rick hesitated.

"Make up your mind!" Moustafa snapped. The pistol steadied on a line with Rick's head.

"Give it to him," Scotty said. "He means it."

There were shots from outside again. Moustafa blazed, "Hurry! Youssef's men must be loose. I count three and shoot! One, two . . ."

"Hold it," Rick said hurriedly. "It's under the amplifier."

He walked to the amplifier and bent, fumbling with the door latch. If he could shield his motions, he could grab the cat, turn, and throw. He might be lucky . . .

"Just hand him the cat," Scotty said quickly.

Rick seethed inside, but he knew Scotty was right. The Egyptian cat wasn't worth his life, no matter what it contained. He opened the door and took the cat out. Then he turned slowly and held it out to Moustafa.

"You're being wise," Moustafa said. His eyes gleamed. He reached for the cat. Rick handed it to him.

"Drop!" a voice yelled. Rick and Scotty dove to the floor on the instant. Moustafa whirled, gun lifted to shoot, and saw no one.

"The building is surrounded by police officers," the voice said. "Just drop your gun." The voice came from outside the doorway, and it belonged to Ismail ben Adhem.

Moustafa yelled desperately, "Don't try anything, or I shoot the Americans!" He faced the empty doorway, ready.

Ben's voice said, "If you will turn slowly, you will see a shotgun barrel pointed at you through the window. If you turn rapidly, it fires. And, as you turn, another shotgun will come through the doorway to cover you. You're all done, Kemel. Better drop it. I want you alive."

Third Brother turned, slowly and carefully. Rick looked up and saw the shotgun barrel, as Ben had promised. He saw Ben step through the doorway, a riot gun in his hands.

Moustafa's Luger dropped to the floor.

CHAPTER XIX

# The Cat's Secret

THE tape machines ran unnoticed, except for an occasional glance from Rick and Scotty. All through the fight the signals had continued, with no one paying any attention. Rick hoped that if they came from intelligent beings, they were of a kind that didn't get involved in gang fights.

Next to him, bandages around one thigh, Youssef sat, his hands handcuffed together in his lap. Moustafa, unharmed but helpless, was handcuffed in another chair. From outside, the wail of ambulances announced that the wounded were being carried off, the police driver among them. He had been knocked out by a chest shot, but Ben assured the boys there were superb surgeons in Cairo who would take good care of him.

The inspector sat on a chair facing the others, the Egyptian cat in his hand.

"Now that things are quiet again," he said, "I think we might talk a little. I promised our two American guests that they would find out the secret of this little beast, and now is as good a time as any."

"I can get a saw to open it with," Rick offered eagerly.

Ben grinned. "Patience, Rick. First we must paint a background, so that we may see the whole picture. Where shall we begin? With Moustafa?"

Kemel Moustafa maintained a sullen silence.

"No co-operation? Then I shall begin. Boys, I regret to inform you that Mr. Kemel Moustafa is a member of a conspiracy to overthrow the United Arab Republic government."

Rick and Scotty turned to look at the mustached man. He sat impassively.

"His brothers also are in this conspiracy. He told you they were in Beirut, but he was not truthful. They are in jail, here in Cairo, awaiting trial. We picked up Ali the day before you arrived. We did not get Fuad until an hour before you visited him. The local people were nervous over the arrest. Many in that neighborhood support the Moustafas."

Kemel Moustafa spoke. "I'm not in it. You can't prove that I am."

Ben nodded. "Proof may be difficult. That is why you were allowed to remain at large while we collected your brothers. But, meanwhile, we have you on a charge of armed robbery, since you used a pistol to get the cat from our American friends a few minutes ago." He turned to the boys. "Talk of overthrowing a government probably sounds strange to you. It has been many years since the American government was in any danger of revolt."

"We don't understand some of the foreign revolu-

tions," Rick agreed. "But I suppose when a group isn't satisfied, it's apt to plot a revolution if there seems to be a chance of success."

"That's right," Ben agreed. "Our country is much older than yours, historically, but actually it's much younger. The Republic is pretty new. Some of our dissatisfied citizens still think it's more efficient to make changes with bullets instead of ballots."

Scotty asked, "Why do they want to make changes? What kind of changes?"

The inspector grinned. "Many kinds. We have groups that think the monarchy ought to be restored. We have others who think our foreign policy is too neutral, or that it isn't neutral enough. And we also have people who don't like our currency controls because they prevent tremendous profits from speculation. There are other groups, too. All are minorities and the only way they can see to make rapid changes is to overthrow the government and set up their own."

"Then you have revolutionaries plotting all over the place!" Rick exclaimed.

"It's not quite that bad. Most groups have little support, and only one or two have any funds. It takes money for revolution, you know."

Rick could see that revolutions cost plenty, and he began to see the importance of the Egyptian cat. In the little plastic statue, in some form, were the finances of the revolt!

"The money for the Moustafa revolution was to come from America," Ben continued. "Bartouki

needed a messenger, so he waited until one came along. That was you."

Rick protested, "But why should he trust his finances to a stranger? There must have been better ways of getting the money here!"

The officer shook his head. "It is not as easy as you think. We know who these revolutionaries are. We keep an eye on their comings and goings. They do not get past our borders without a thorough customs inspection. Now, ask yourself—who can get past customs with no difficulty? Officials of governments, scientific groups who come at our invitation, and tourists."

"Why didn't he use someone disguised as a tourist?" Scotty asked.

"That probably would have been his method, except that you stumbled into things and the chance was too good to miss. Also, you did not declare the cat on your customs statement. We would have been interested in an Egyptian cat coming the wrong way!"

"I didn't know I was supposed to declare it," Rick said. "It just never occurred to me."

Ben glared. "Technically, you have broken our laws." He relented and grinned. "But if you will promise to import no more Egyptian cats . . ."

"I promise, swear, and affirm," Rick said hastily.

"Good. To continue. We took Ali Moustafa into custody, but not before a phone call reached him from New York. His chief clerk listened to this call and sold the information to Youssef. The clerk also

agreed, for a share of the profits, to pretend to be Ali, and he enlisted the help of the other clerks. We know this from the clerk. He talked freely, in the hope of leniency."

Ben turned to Youssef. "Do you know what is in the cat?"

The thief shook his head. "Only that it is of great value. I bought the clerk's information and help because I knew it was the Moustafas who stole the necklace from the museum. I believe the necklace is in the cat."

Rick stared. The Kefren necklace, worth a quarter of a million! Great ghostly pyramids! This was big business!

"The necklace was smuggled out of the country," Ben agreed. "We are certain of that. But I do not believe it is in the cat."

"Open it," Rick begged.

The inspector held up his hand. "Presently. Aren't you enjoying the suspense?"

"It's killing us," Scotty wailed.

"Ah, the impatience of the young!" Ismail ben Adhem obviously was having a good time. "Well, the pieces are nearly tied up."

"Good," Rick applauded.

Ben chuckled. "On the same day that Kerama invited you to come, I had a call from the Interpol clearinghouse in Paris, a relay from the San Francisco police. A wealthy collector of early Egyptian objects in San Francisco had been bragging that he had just purchased a genuine necklace that had be-

longed to one of the early Pharaohs. We requested the Americans to investigate."

That explained the Californian who talked too much, Rick thought. He had known the purchase was illegal, but, like many collectors, could not resist letting a few friends in on his secret—and the secret had leaked to the police.

"This collector had paid for the necklace with a certified check, which was cashed by an American accomplice." Ben paused for effect. "The amount was two hundred thousand dollars cash."

He got his effect. All four of his listeners gasped in amazement.

"Even Moustafa didn't know the exact amount," Rick thought.

"The money was in thousand-dollar bills. I have the serial numbers."

Rick spoke up. "But, Ben, numbered bills are like a flag! No one can spend them without getting caught."

"That is true, Rick, when something illegal is involved. Had the collector kept his mouth shut, no one would have known any illegality was involved in the transaction."

"But you can't use American money in Cairo," Scotty objected. "It has to be changed."

"Right, Scotty. The problem was this: the revolutionaries could not convert their dollars to Egyptian pounds in America. It would have attracted too much attention, because only a few banks and finance houses can handle such amounts, and then only in co-operation with the government. Their best

bet was to get the dollars into the Arab countries. We can watch international traffic, but local traffic among the Arab nations is hard to control. They would have sent the dollars to another country to be changed."

"An Arab country?" Rick asked.

"Probably. The borders between the Republic and its neighbors are desert, impossible to patrol. The dollars could have been sent, then gradually converted into Egyptian currency. Dollars sell readily in this part of the world, and sometimes not too many questions are asked."

"I get the picture," Rick stated. "The Moustafas stole the necklace, and smuggled it to America. Bartouki sold it to the collector, through an American helper. Then he had the money sealed in the cat. He handed it to me, because my sister gave him an opening and I fell into it. Meanwhile, you put Ali in jail, then Fuad. Youssef got into the act through the clerk. So then we had Kemel Moustafa and Youssef on our trail. Why didn't you put Kemel in jail, too? And how about Bartouki?"

"We had no evidence that would stand up in court against Kemel, although we were convinced he was in the act with his brothers. That's why I waited until he tried to take the cat by force."

Rick exploded, "You used us and the cat for bait!"

"It worked," Ben pointed out mildly. "We got both Youssef and Moustafa, although the trap was only for Kemel. And you were never in any real danger, except for a stray bullet. I've been in the unfin-

ished barracks with my men since noontime. The senior scientists knew it. That's why they were willing to leave you alone. Two of my men mingled with Youssef's gang as soon as they arrived, and weren't detected. Any sign of real danger to you and they'd have bailed you out fast. But we were holding off, because I had a radio message that Kemel was on his way with a gang of his own."

"You certainly had things taped," Scotty said admiringly. "I guess we ought to be mad. But you'd have an equal right to get mad because we tried to go it alone."

"We'll call it square," Ben agreed. "About Bartouki. We needed the evidence of the cat, and a statement from you that he had handed it to you. That was the only sure way of tying him in. Tonight we'll send a message via Interpol to the New York police."

So far, everything had been circumstantial evidence. Rick wanted to see if their guesses were correct. "Open the cat," he begged.

"Get the saw," Ben said.

Rick jumped to his feet. There was a toolbox in the closet. He brought it to the inspector.

Ben handed the cat to him. "Saw away."

Scotty held the cat firmly on a chair while Rick wielded the saw. Plastic sawdust flew from under the blade.

Rick felt the blade hit metal and stopped. "Hit something!" he said excitedly. "Metal, but soft. Like lead."

Scotty groaned. "Do you suppose Bartouki was telling the truth?"

"We'll soon know." Rick moved the saw blade to a different angle and began cutting around the cat, changing angles each time he hit the material on the inside. Before long, the Egyptian cat had a cut around its middle and Rick put the saw away. There were a hammer and screw driver in the toolbox. He inserted the tip of the screw driver into the saw cut and tapped the handle with the hammer.

The cat split open.

Scotty let out a yell of triumph. In the bottom half was a square of lead, and it was clearly a box, not a solid lump.

"Hurry!" Rick pleaded.

Scotty took the screw driver and pried. The lead box yielded reluctantly.

There wasn't a sound in the control room except for the impulses from the tape recorder, which ran on unnoticed.

Scotty pried gingerly, and the lead box came loose and dropped to the floor.

Rick scooped it up and turned it in his hands, looking for the opening. He found only a thin seam of solder around one flat side.

"Have to cut it open," Rick said. Using his jackknife, he scored the bead of solder. It cut easily. He scored it again, deeper, and felt the knife blade penetrate. He turned the box and did the same thing to both ends.

Face flushed with excitement, he took the screw

driver, thrust it under the lid, and bent it upward.

The box opened.

It contained a solid wad of bills. Rick touched the top one, still a little unbelieving. The figure on it was 1000!

He turned the box over and tapped it. The bills dropped out. He didn't doubt there were two hundred of them.

Two hundred thousand dollars!

Rick looked at the expressions on the faces around him. Scotty was standing with openmouthed excitement. Youssef was leaning forward, feasting on the wealth with greedy eyes. Moustafa was slumped in resignation. And Ismail ben Adhem had the look of the cat that swallowed the cream.

"Now," Rick said triumphantly, "now we know why the cat was important!"

CHAPTER XX

# The Signal Vanishes

Rick studied the Sanborn tracing. He could see where the pulsed signals gradually disappeared into a much stronger, steady 21-centimeter signal.

"We lost it at 4:02 yesterday," Winston said. "It hasn't reappeared. Apparently the signal source moved into, or behind, a globular cluster."

Rick's brows knit. "That's more evidence that it was moving contrary to normal direction?"

"It is," Dr. Kerama agreed. "What's more, the calculated velocity was simply incredible. The only velocities we know of that approximate it are those of galaxies at the very limit of our instruments."

Rick said what was on his mind. "It was a spaceship. What else would travel across normal star directions giving out signals?"

He grinned sheepishly. It wasn't strictly proper to blurt out his own theories.

"The possibility has occurred to us," Kerama said slowly. "It is certainly the most appealing explanation, and it is natural that it should come to your

mind, Rick. But it is not the only possible solution."

Winston agreed. "There are others that are difficult to explain, unless you have a good background in astrophysics, Rick."

Scotty said, "I'm sure you have lots of theories, but honestly—what do you really think?"

The scientist glanced at his Egyptian colleagues. Farid urged, "Tell him what we talked about last night. It may not be subject to any real proof, but I think the boys have a right to know what we've concluded.

"All right," Winston nodded. "To put it as briefly as possible, we agree that the most likely explanation is that we intercepted intelligent signals, sent out for some reason by some beings we can't even imagine. For one thing, the space object is so small that we can't even give it a dimension. Neither can the other telescopes. Mount Palomar can see nothing."

"A spaceship," Rick said soberly. The implications of it were tremendous!

"It's as good a name as any. And now, boys, let's start folding up our part of the operation. We have reservations on tomorrow's flight. That will put us into New York just about suppertime."

"We hate to leave," Scotty told the Egyptian scientists. "Unfortunately, thanks to that Egyptian cat, we didn't get to see much of Cairo."

"At least I saw a piece of the Sahara Desert," Rick said with a grin. "Anyway, let's move. I have some shopping to do for my folks, and for Jan Miller, and especially Barby."

"Going to take her a bouquet of Egyptian poison ivy?" Winston asked with a smile.

"Nope. I'm going to buy her some nice things, but I'm also going to take her the remains of the Egyptian cat. Just as a reminder."

He turned to glance around the control room before leaving. The plaster on the ceiling would need repairing where the Sten gun had chipped it down to the concrete roof slab, but there was little real damage to show the effect of last night's fight. Even the window broken by Youssef had been repaired.

How simple it all had been—once Ismail ben Adhem had taken over. Rick knew why he and Scotty had failed to solve the mystery. There was too much information they did not have, such as the disposal of the Kefren necklace and knowing that the Moustafas were the prime movers in a revolution.

Farid and Kerama had not been surprised. "There are some who do not like the controls on trade and exchange that our government had to impose," Farid explained. "Mostly, they are people who had things pretty much their own way before the Republic was formed. They used to get special treatment from government officials who were in their pay, and they grew rich. Now, that's impossible. So they plot revolution to bring the bad old days back again—bad old days for most Egyptians, that is. The Moustafas and Bartouki used to be pretty powerful. I suppose they wanted that power back."

Dr. Kerama added, "This is probably not the last

try at revolution the police will have to stop. But our country grows more stable all the time, and the would-be revolutionaries grow older and perhaps wiser."

"Time goes on," Rick agreed. "Things change." He thought of Kemel Moustafa the revolutionary, the only one of the three brothers they had met—and he thought of Hassan's saying. He added, "The little jackal barks, but the caravan passes."

Hakim Farid laughed outright. "We'll make a good Egyptian of you yet, Rick."

The time along the Greenwich meridian, from which all world times are measured, was 9:30 P.M.

At Spindrift Island, it was 4:30 in the late afternoon. Barby Brant sat with her close friend, Jan Miller, before the roaring fire in the library.

"I'll bet Rick and Scotty are having a marvelous time," Barby said. There was no envy in the statement. She always protested volubly at being left behind, but that was more a matter of principle than anything else. Once the boys had gone, she always simmered down enough to be glad they could go, even if she could not.

Jan, a slim, attractive dark-haired girl, said, "I'll bet they're glad you suggested that Rick deliver the Egyptian cat, too. It was an introduction to a real merchant, right in the bazaar."

Barby smiled. "They probably made a lot of new friends from just that one thing!"

It was 5:30 in the afternoon on a tiny island off the

coast of Venezuela. Two elderly men looked up from their inspection of a hot spring. The smaller of the two shrugged. He spoke in Spanish.

"I will keep watch. If new signs develop, I know where to go for help. It is the Spindrift Scientific Foundation. If anyone can help us, that group can. If they can't—well, we are doomed."

In Cairo, it was 11:30. Rick Brant hauled himself to the top of the great pyramid of Khufu. Scotty and Hassan joined him.

The view was magnificent. Cairo sparkled like a million jewels, and in places they could see the silver ribbon of the Nile. Rick turned and looked at the radio telescope at Sahara Wells, its great parabolic reflector gleaming in the brilliant moonlight.

He was content. As a last adventure, and with the permission of Winston, the three had decided to climb the pyramid by moonlight. Now the mysteries of the Egyptian cat and the strange signal from space were behind them. In eleven hours they would be air-borne, and tomorrow night they would sleep at home.

Hassan spoke. "I sorry to see you go. You come back, maybe?"

"Someday," Scotty said.

Rick added, "When we show my sister that picture of you with the fancy clothes and that scimitar you borrowed, we'll have to bring her to see you in person. She won't believe her eyes."

Hassan chuckled softly. "Tell her I will be her bodyguard, to protect her from Youssef, if he ever

gets free from jail. I will even protect her from our so terrible Egyptian cats!"

The three sat down on the rough stone at the top of the pyramid. Once the great monument had risen to a sharply pointed capstone, but the blocks had been removed and only a tall wooden pole showed how high the pyramid had once reached.

Rick looked up at the stars and traced the outlines of the familiar constellations, Orion, the Twins, Taurus, the Big Dog, and the Little Dog.

Out there, far beyond those constellations, a spaceship had once passed, sending unknown signals to an unknown destination, eventually to be intercepted here, within sight of the pyramids.

"I wonder what it was," he mused aloud.

Scotty needed no explanation. "Does it matter, if it was some kind of intelligence?"

Rick shook his head. "Not really. It was nearly five thousand light years away, so it took five thousand years to reach us. So when the signals were first sent, this pyramid hadn't even been built. Egypt hadn't been united."

Scotty added, "And in the Upper Nile Kingdom, people were worshiping Bubaste . . ."

". . . and Egyptian cats," Rick finished.

The boy glanced up at the stars again and saw the tight cluster of the Pleiades. Across the world, the constellation was just coming into view of anyone standing on top of the mountain known as El Viejo, the Old One.

The slow stirring in the earth deep under El Viejo

would take a few months to grow, but already events taking form would plunge Rick, Scotty, and the Spindrift scientists into the midst of mob violence, armed revolt, and one of the most daring scientific feats of all time, a story to be told in the adventure of **THE FLAMING MOUNTAIN.**

Cultivated Land
Wooded Land
Pirates
Rocket
Tidal Flats
CLIFF
CLEARING
New Jersey Coast

at Dock
NORTH WING
HOUSE
SOUTH WING
Farm
Landing Strip
Apple Orchard
LABORATORIES
CLIFF
SPINDRIFT ISLAND

THE EGYPTIAN CAT MYSTERY

JOHN BLAINE

GROSSET & DUNLAP